

JAMES HADLEY CHASE

THERE'S
A HIPPIE
ON THE
HIGHWAY

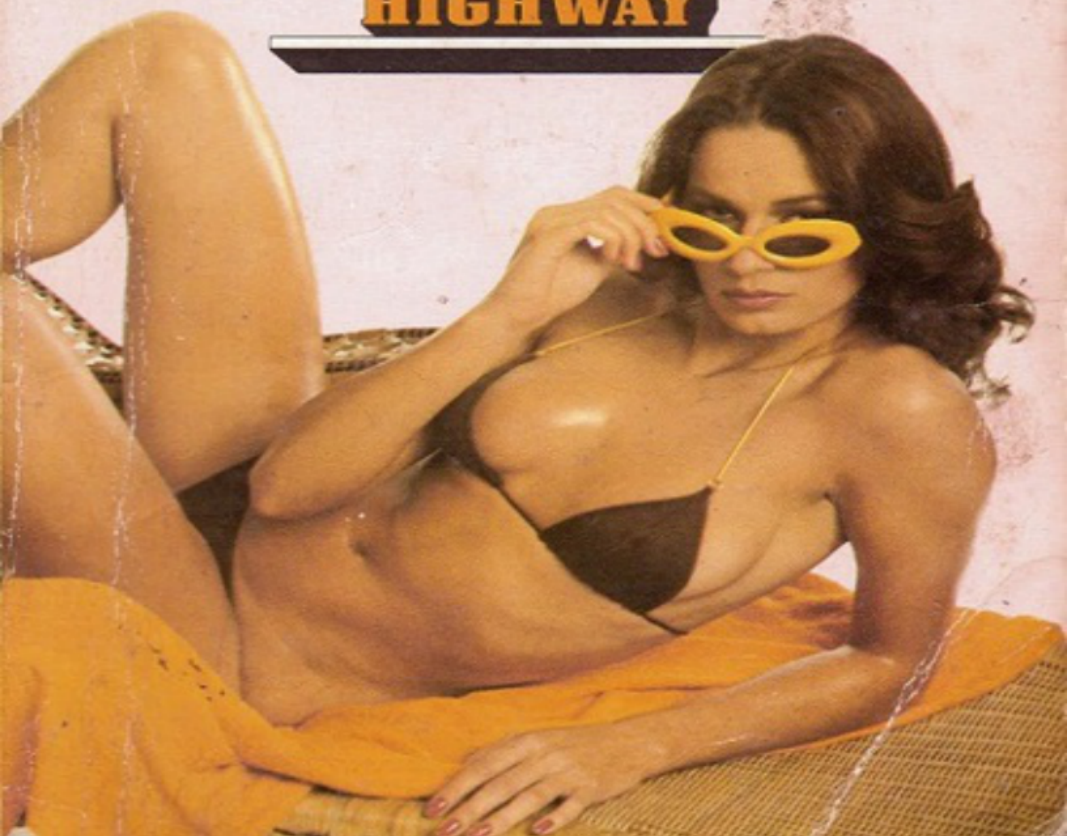


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There's a Hippie on the Highway
James Hadley Chase
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Chapter One

'Take a look at that lot!' the truck driver said, and he spat out of the window of the cab. 'I'd rather give a ride to a leper than to those freaks!'

Harry Mitchell rested his broad back against the throbbing leather of the cab's seat. His eyes shifted from one side of the broad highway to the other, surveying the groups of hippies waiting with their bags, cardboard containers and guitars as the big truck roared towards them.

'Scum!' the truck driver said 'The future people!' he snorted. 'That's a laugh! Stinking junkies who'd cut their mother's throats for a fix!' The truck approached three girls in hipsters and shirts. They waved to the driver, making obscene gestures, 'Little whores!' Again he spat out of the window. 'Am I glad I never had kids! My old lady wanted them, but I said no. My generation was bad enough, but this lot . . .'

Harry Mitchell took a crumpled pack of Camels from his shirt pocket and offered it. When the two men lit up, the truck driver said, 'I bet you're wondering why I gave you a ride.' He looked sharply at Harry before swivelling his eyes back to the road. 'I'll tell you. You're just out of the army. I can spot a guy who's done service . . . done service like me. I was in the Korea box-up. When did you get back?'

Harry squinted at the black ribbon of tarmac rushing towards him.

'Ten days,' he said.

'Yeah.' The truck driver nodded. 'I can smell the army on you still. Takes time to wear off. How did you get on?'

Harry shrugged.

'Like the rest of them.'

'Glad to be back?'

'Oh, I guess.'

'Yeah.' The truck driver nodded understandingly. 'Not sure, huh? Damn funny thing . . . the army. Kind of gets you, doesn't it? When you're in, you curse it like hell. When you're out, you miss it . . . you get kind of lonely. I know. It happened to me when I got out.' He sucked smoke into his lungs and let the smoke roll out of his widely spaced nostrils. 'Was it as rough as

these newspaper finks make it out to be?'

Harry moved restlessly.

'It was the boredom that was rough.' He paused, his mind going back to the steamy heat of the rice fields, the jungle and the

frightening ambushes. He decided he didn't want to think about it. It was over for him. He had done his three years. It was now dirty water under the bridge.

The truck driver sensed that this big, blond man was as bored with war as he had been himself when he had come home. It was disappointing as he would have liked to have exchanged stories and to have heard the true facts about the fighting, but if this guy didn't want to talk about it, there was no point pushing it.

The truck driver whose name was Sam Bentz had gone into a Quick-Snack bar outside Dayton Beach for a beer and a sandwich. He was heading for Orangeville to pick up a load of fruit to deliver to a northern market. It was a run he did twice a week: a run he had grown to hate because of the scum who infested the highway as they headed down to the sun and the sea and almost threw themselves under his wheels for a ride.

At the bar, drinking a Coke and eating a three-decker sandwich was the big, blond man with pale, alert blue eyes, a nose that was slightly out of true as if someone in the past had pushed it to the left with a heavy fist: a man of around thirty years of age. By the way he held himself and by his leanness and his air of confidence, Bentz knew he was just out of the army.

They got talking, and it was Bentz who had offered the ride when Harry Mitchell had said he was heading south. Bentz couldn't remember when he had last offered a ride to anyone, but he liked the look of this guy, wanted to talk to him and was glad when he accepted.

Well, Bentz thought, if the army is out, it doesn't mean we have nothing to talk about.

'Are you heading for Miami?' he asked. 'I can't take you that far. My stop is Orangeville that's a hundred and ten miles this side of Miami.'

'I'm heading for Paradise City,' Harry said. 'You know it?'

'Never been there, but I've heard enough about it. Maybe you would feel more at home in Miami. It's a more democratic city. Paradise City is strictly for the rich. The cops there don't take to folk like us. Maybe you have a job waiting for you there?'

'No but I guess I'll find one. I'm told when the season starts there's plenty of casual work to be had,' Harry said. 'I'm not fussy what I do. I want some sun and sea air.' He grinned. 'You'd think I would have had plenty of that in Vietnam but I want the sun I can lie in and enjoy.'

'Take my tip,' Bentz said, his heavy face suddenly serious. 'When I drop you off at Orangeville, move by the back roads, keep off the highway. You don't want to get mixed up with the scum. Sure, you

can look after yourself. We all think we can, but no one guy, no matter how good he is, can take on eight or nine scum . . . they all move in packs.' He glanced down at the new rucksack wedged between Harry's feet. 'They see that and they'll want it. That strap watch of yours would tempt them too, and believe me, when the scum want anything, they have it.'

'I'll watch it,' Harry said a little impatiently. He spoke with the confidence of a man who knows how to look after himself.

Bentz put a heavy hand on Harry's knee.

'A loner like you would be like a lame lion to a pack of jackals. This highway ain't safe. The one thing that really eats me is the thought of having a breakdown. I've seen lots of action in my time and have had a lot of fights, but it scares me silly to think of being stuck on this highway with a dead engine. Those young bastards would be all over me and what I've got on this cab like white ants, and I couldn't do a thing about it.'

His expression and his tone of voice made Harry look sharply at him.

'Is it that bad?' he asked, impressed in spite of his confidence.

'Yeah. This time of year is sheer poison when they are on the road in packs,' Bentz said, shaking his head. 'A buddy of mine got a broken axle and got stuck twenty miles out of Orangeville. He was carrying a load of oranges the way I do. The Cops found him with a broken leg, three busted ribs, his face kicked to a pulp and half a ton of fruit spoilt. They had taken his clothes and what money he had and they had even stripped parts of the engine out. My buddy spent ten weeks in hospital. When he came out, he quit trucking. His nerves were shot to hell. He has now some piddling job in a garage. I'm telling you: this highway is poison, so keep off it.' He jerked his head. 'Look, here's another bunch of them.' He increased his speed.

Five youths with hair to their shoulders, some of them with straggly, dirty beards, wearing hipsters and loose dirty cotton coats were waving at the approaching truck.

When they saw the truck wasn't going to stop, one of them, younger than the rest, jumped off the grass verge onto the highway. For a heart stopping moment, Harry thought the fender of the truck was going to catch the boy, but Bentz swerved the truck expertly. Both men had a glimpse of a white, thin savage face, glittering eyes with enormous pupils and a fuzz of hair on the receding chin, then it was gone. Yells followed them, and a lump of rock banged down on the cab roof and bounced off onto the highway.

'See what I mean? That little animal was hopped to the eyeballs . . . didn't know what he was doing,' Bentz spat out of the window. 'If there had been another truck coming the other way, I'd have hit it.'

‘Don’t the police patrol this route?’

‘So what? This is a free country ain’t it? Nothing illegal in walking is there?’ Bentz grimaced. ‘They have only to wait for the cops to pass and they are back in business.’

Harry shrugged. The journey ahead of him was beginning to lose some of its anticipated pleasure.

‘Paradise City is about a hundred miles from Miami, isn’t it?’

‘About that. That’ll give you around two hundred from Orangeville. You take the dirt roads. I’ve got a map you can have.’

An hour later, Bentz, who had been talking most of the time about the Government, sport, his wife and the latest moon shot which he thought was one hell of a way to waste money, slowed the truck and turned off the highway onto a secondary road.

‘Nearly there,’ he said. ‘A couple of miles more for me. Just ahead is your road.’ He indicated a narrow dirt road that led off the secondary road and went winding through forestland. He pulled up. ‘You’ll have some extra walking but you could pick up a ride. Farmers use this road, but watch out. Nowhere is really safe in this district.’ He took a map from a rack in front of him. ‘It’s nice country, a little swampy now and then, and there are snakes.’ He grinned. ‘Don’t imagine they’ll worry you after where you’ve been.’ He reached up again and took from the rack an Indian Club. ‘Take this. I’ve got its brother. It’s a mighty nice weapon . . . you never know; you might need it.’

Harry shook his head.

‘Thanks all the same. I won’t need it.’

‘Take it,’ Bentz urged. ‘You don’t know what you might need.’ He pushed the club into Harry’s hand. ‘Well, so long . . . have sun and fun.’

The two men shook hands.

‘Thanks for the ride,’ Harry said. ‘I’ll look out for you on my way back. I don’t reckon to stay longer than a couple of months.’

He swung himself to the ground. A little self-consciously, he pushed the club into his rucksack and then hoisted the rucksack onto his shoulders.

‘Do that,’ Bentz said, grinning. ‘I’m here Mondays and Thursdays all through the season. Ask anyone at Orangeville for Sam Bentz. They’ll tell you where to find me. I’ll be glad to give you a ride back. Maybe we’ll have time to talk about your war . . . it kind of interests me.’

Harry smiled.

‘That’s more than it does me. Well, see you, and thanks again.’

As the truck started, he waved and then set off down the dirt road with long swinging strides.

The dusty, winding road was deserted. Harry walked for five hot miles without seeing anyone or any car. Coming to a shady forest of eucalyptus trees, he left the road, sat down with his back to a tree and lit a cigarette. He studied the map Bentz had given him. The road he was on wound for some ten miles to a fork: the left branch led back to the highway; the other to a small town called Little Orangeville. The road beyond this town continued on through forestland to another town called Yellow Acres. Harry calculated he had about twenty miles to walk before he hit Yellow Acres. He decided to spend the night there.

He set off again. After three hard fighting years in the Army, he was in first class trim and full of energy. He looked forward to the walk.

Around 13.00 hours, he sat down under the shade of a tree on the roadside and ate an egg and tomato sandwich and drank a lukewarm Coke. He lit a cigarette, and as he was getting to his feet, he heard a car approaching. Looking to his right, he saw a police car turning the bend and heading towards him.

Two massively built cops were in the car, and when the driver saw Harry, he accelerated and skidded the car to a standstill right beside him. The car doors slammed open and the two men slid out. The non-driver, over six foot in height, with a red fleshy face and small cop eyes planted himself in front of Harry. The driver, a younger man, but with a similar fleshy, red face and hard eyes, hung back, his hand on the butt of his holstered gun.

‘Who are you and what are you doing here?’ the older cop barked.

Harry saw the sergeant’s stripes on the cop’s sleeve.

‘Just walking,’ he said mildly.

‘Yeah?’ The Sergeant’s eyes ran over Harry’s short-sleeved shirt, over his neat khaki drill slacks with the knife-edge crease, over his new, but dusty walking shoes. He relaxed a little.

‘What’s your name?’

‘Harry Mitchell.’

‘Where are you from?’

‘New York.’

‘Got any papers?’

Harry unbuttoned his shirt pocket and took out his Army discharge papers, his driving license and his passport. He handed them over.

The Sergeant examined the discharge papers, then squinted at Harry.

‘Just back, huh? Paratrooper, huh?’ He suddenly grinned in a friendly way. ‘I bet you had a little fun out there, Sergeant.’

'You might call it that,' Harry said quietly. 'I don't.'

The Sergeant handed him back his papers.

'Where are you heading for?'

'Paradise City.'

'That's a step. Are you walking because you have to or because you like walking?'

The good-natured expression on Harry's face began to fade.

He was getting bored by these questions.

'Is that any of your business, Sergeant?' he asked, looking directly into the hard cop eyes.

'Yes, it's my business. Anyone we find heading South without money, we haul in. You got any money?'

'Yes, I've got money: two hundred and ten dollars,' Harry said, 'and I like walking.'

The Sergeant nodded.

'Got a job waiting for you in Paradise City?'

'No, but I'll find one. I don't reckon to stay more than two months: a job's waiting for me in New York.'

The Sergeant nodded.

'You may not believe it,' he said in a more relaxed conversational tone, 'but this district is about as unhealthy and as dangerous as your paddy fields in Vietnam.'

Harry shifted restlessly like a man restraining his impatience only out of politeness.

'You think so? But then you haven't been in my paddy fields as you call them while I've been on your roads for the past two days. I think there's a little exaggeration going on about this district. Frankly, I'm not worried.'

The Sergeant sighed and lifted his heavy shoulders.

'A couple of hours back,' he said, 'five youngsters, one of them a girl, stopped at a farm about five miles back. They stole three chickens and a transistor radio. There were four grown men on the farm. They saw these kids take the chickens and they saw them walk into the farmhouse and take the radio. None of these four grown men did anything about it. They let the kids do what they did and when they had gone, they called us. I said they did right to have left these kids alone. If and when I catch up with them I'm going to talk to them with a gun in my fist. . . that's the only way to talk to them. I guess the only way to talk to the Viet Cong is also to keep a gun in your fist. No, I wouldn't say there's any exaggeration in this district: that's the last thing I would say.'

Harry's blue eyes suddenly flashed with anger.

'Just what the hell is going on in this country since I've been away?' he said half to himself. 'What makes grown men scared of

dirty, boneless kids?’

The Sergeant cocked his head on one side as he regarded Harry.

‘Things change even in three years. What you’ve forgotten is we have a dope problem in this country which keeps escalating. Most of these kids heading south are hopheads. They really believe they are ten times larger than life. They will do things they wouldn’t dream of doing if they weren’t stoned. Folk around here know that. They don’t want to get maimed or cut or

put in a hospital just when it is picking time. You remember that, Sergeant. Watch out for these kids, keep clear of them and don’t try anything heroic. I wouldn’t like to think your first vacation after three years could get spoilt. You don’t want to spend the next two months in a hospital bed, do you?’ He turned to his companion. ‘Okay, Jackson, let’s go.’ Nodding to Harry, he got back into the police car.

Harry watched them drive away. Then he picked up his rucksack, rubbed his jaw thoughtfully, shrugged his shoulders and started off down the long, dusty road.

* * *

A red neon light that spelt out GOOD EATS dominated the road that was the main street of Yellow Acres. Below the sign was a box-shaped, clapboard building with curtained windows and a veranda where customers could sit and drink and watch any activity there might be during the day. It was seldom used after dark.

This building was the only restaurant-bar in the town and it was owned by Toni Morelli, a fat, jovial Italian. Some twenty years ago, Morelli had drifted into Yellow Acres, taken a look around and had decided this tiny farming town needed a restaurant. Because he was all things to all men, could produce substantial tasty and cheap food and was always willing to listen to any tale of woe, he prospered. When his wife died of a chest complaint the whole town turned out for the funeral.

This turnout told Toni as nothing else could that he was not only a valuable member of the community, but that he was genuinely liked. The discovery did much to lessen his grief. His daughter, Maria, had stepped into her mother’s shoes and she took over the running of the bar and the restaurant while her father remained in the kitchen.

Most of Morelli’s business was done between 11.00 hours and 15.00 hours. Farmers coming into Yellow Acres stopped at the restaurant for a drink and lunch. Around 20.00 hours trade fell off sharply. The folk of Yellow Acres believed in eating their dinners at home: one and all were rabid television addicts, but Morelli kept the restaurant open. He liked company, and if some passing stranger or

some hungry trucker who didn't want to wait until he reached Orangeville before he ate looked in, he received a welcome.

Harry Mitchell came down the main street around 20.30 hours. He was slightly tired, extremely hungry and longing for a cold beer. The red neon sign made him quicken his pace and he climbed the four steps up to the veranda, pushed open the door and entered the restaurant. He paused to look around.

There were about twenty tables, covered with red and white check plastic cloths. Each table was neatly set for four people. To his right was a bar and a long glittering mirror a big fan turned slowly in the ceiling moving the thick, hot air.

A dark haired girl, plump with a creamy white skin was behind the bar, reading a newspaper. She looked up as Harry set down his rucksack, and after her eyes had swept over him with approval, she gave him a daring smile.

'Welcome to Yellow Acres,' she said. 'What would you like to drink . . . I can see you need one.'

Returning her smile and leaving his rucksack, Harry crossed to the bar.

'You're right,' he said. 'Beer, please . . . lots and lots of cold beer.'

She produced a bottle of beer beaded with icy condensation, snapped off the cap, poured and then pushed the glass towards him.

He raised the glass, looking at her, then said, 'To the light in your eyes and the sun in your smile.' Then he drank.

No one had ever said anything to Maria like that and she blushed a little, liking it.

'Thank you,' she said.

Harry set down the glass, ran his tongue over his froth covered lips, and drew in a long, slow breath.

'When you need it . . . it sure hits the spot! Could I have another, please and is it too late to eat.'

Maria laughed happily as she poured another beer.

'It's always eating time here. How about spaghetti, two pork chops with french fries and peas out of the garden and apple pie?'

Harry's eyes opened wide. He was expecting some kind of sandwich.

'You mean I can have all that right now?'

Maria turned and slid back the hatch behind her.

'Dad, we have a hungry customer. The special as fast as you can fix it.'

A fat, beaming face appeared in the hatchway. Morelli surveyed Harry, nodded his approval and said, 'Spaghetti coming right up. Ten minutes for the chops. Do you like onions, mister?'

Harry made a moaning sound and slapped his flat, muscular

stomach.

‘I like everything, thank you.’

Morelli’s beaming face vanished ‘Sit down,’ Maria said. ‘Take your beer.’ She pointed to a nearby table.

Harry collected his rucksack and put it by the table, then sat down. He looked around the deserted restaurant.

‘Is this an off-night or is this normal?’ he asked.

‘Pretty normal. We rely on our lunch trade, but we do get the odd one at night so we keep open. Have you come far?’

‘New York.’ Again Harry looked around. He was feeling relaxed now. ‘Nice place you have here. I wasn’t expecting anything this nice. Do you know any place here where I could get a bed for the night?’

Maria smiled, She rested her chubby elbows on the counter and regarded Harry. She thought he was like some movie star she had once seen. Who was it? Paul Newman? Yes, of course, Paul Newman He had the same startling blue eyes and the same way of wearing his hair.

‘We have a room. Three dollars with breakfast and that means one of Dad’s specials . . . that work?’

‘You have a customer,’ Harry said.

An enormous mound of spaghetti covered with Bolognese sauce was handed through the hatch, Maria brought it to him and set it before him. She paused at his side for a brief moment, watching him as he picked up a fork, then she hurried to a serving table to get bread.

‘Your father do all the cooking?’ Harry asked.

‘That’s right.’ Maria placed the bread by Harry’s side. She stared at him, fascinated. She hadn’t seen such a powerful, well-built, handsome man before except on the movie screen. ‘Believe it or not, Dad and I have been here twenty years. I was born here.’

‘Do you like it here?’ Harry asked as he expertly rolled the spaghetti around his fork and conveyed the roll to his mouth. The sudden smell of frying onions made his nose twitch.

‘Yes, I like it,’ Maria told him. ‘The evenings are a bit dull. Neither Dad nor me care for TV. But when the boys come in for lunch, it’s a lot of fun.’

‘Best spaghetti I’ve ever tasted,’ Harry said and meant it.

‘You enjoy it.’ Maria went around the bar and into the kitchen to tell her father what Harry had just said.

Harry ate ravenously. When he had finished, he pushed his plate aside with a contented sigh. Then he drank the last of the beer as Maria came from the kitchen carrying a laden tray. This she set down on the serving table, whipped away his used plate, looked at the glass, then took it to the bar for a refill when he nodded.

She served him with two pork chops that were two inches thick and smothered with crisp fried onions. There was a dish of fried potatoes and green peas to go with it.

‘Enjoy it,’ she said and took the used plate into the kitchen.

Harry wished she would stay so he could talk to her. She was the type of natural, simple Italian girl he liked. On his way back from Saigon, he had spent a month in Naples and Capri. He had got to like the Italian girls. They seemed to him uncomplicated and kind: girls without problems. The girls he had briefly met during his week in New York had bothered him. They all seemed to have problems: if it wasn’t sex, it was money: if it wasn’t money, it was dieting: if it wasn’t dieting, it was their future. They seemed to have the weight of the world pressing down on them. They yakked and yakked about the Bomb, the Pill, Freedom, Politics and God knows what: things he hadn’t given a damn about when he had been their age: problems, he felt, that were spoiling their lives.

He was just finishing the second chop, as tender and as succulent as the first, when he heard a sound that made him pause: his fork loaded with a piece of meat and chips half way to his mouth.

Someone heavy footed was running down the street: shoe soles made a hurried, slapping sound on the tarmac: someone running with desperate speed: the sound made Harry lay down his fork.

A moment later the runner came up the steps of the restaurant with two bounding thuds that shook the building. The restaurant door burst open.

Even as Harry was staring at the man who had burst in, he became aware of pattering footfalls coming down the street: the sound of several people running. They ran lightly, and there was something menacing in this lightness: the sound a wolf pack might make as it closed on its quarry.

Harry’s quick eyes took in the man as he stood panting by the door. He was around twenty-six years of age, slightly below average height which made him a head shorter than Harry. His black hair reached to his collar and his thin, sharp face was burned to a mahogany colour. Blood ran down the side of his face from an ugly cut above his right eye, and there was a livid bruise on the side of his jaw. His narrow chest heaved with the effort to breathe, sweat plastered his hair to his skull. His red and white check shirt was torn and his white hipsters were streaked with dirt. In his left hand, he clutched a guitar in a canvas case. He had a small duffel bag over his shoulder. All this Harry took in with one quick glance.

The man looked wildly around, like a hunted animal. He caught sight of Harry and he pointed a shaking finger to the street.

‘They are after me. Where can I hide?’

The naked terror in the man's eyes brought Harry to his feet.

'Get down behind the bar and stay there,' he said.

The man staggered to the bar, went behind it and disappeared from sight.

Harry sat down. He pulled his rucksack to him, dipped his hand into it and his fingers closed around the Indian club Sam Bentz had given him.

He waited, listening to the approaching footfalls of the hunters. At the moment when they were very close, Maria came out of the kitchen. She stopped short, catching her breath when she saw the man crouching down her side of the bar.

'It's all right,' Harry said quietly. 'Go back into the kitchen. There could be a little trouble, but leave it to me. I'll take care of it.'

Seeing the blood trickling down the man's face and his look of terror, Maria retreated hurriedly into the kitchen.

There was a long pause, then the restaurant door swung slowly open.

They came in one after the other as silently as ghosts: four youths and a girl carrying a transistor radio. Harry guessed at once that these were the five the police sergeant had told him about: the five who had stolen a radio and three chickens.

He shifted the club so he held it between his knees, hidden by the tablecloth, and he put his hands on the table, resting them there, either side of his plate.

The four youths were cut to a pattern: they were between the ages of seventeen and twenty, not older. All had greasy filthy long hair to their shoulders; three of them sprouted beards; all were indescribably dirty and the smell of their dirt advanced before them in a stomach-turning wave.

The girl was about sixteen years of age: small, thin, vicious and shameless. She wore a black blouse and stained dirty red stretch pants. Harry decided she smelt even worse than the four boys.

'He busted in here, Chuck,' one of the boys said. 'I saw him.'

Apparently Chuck was the leader of the pack. He was the eldest, the tallest and the most vicious looking. He stared around the restaurant until his small, glittering eyes reached Harry. He stared for a long moment at Harry, his head on one side. Harry stared back woodenly.

The other four, now aware of Harry, became motionless.

There was a pause, then Harry's wooden stare began to unsettle Chuck. The pale blue eyes were unwavering. There was no sign of fear. This was something Chuck wasn't used to.

'Seen a guy with a guitar, buster?' he demanded.

Harry edged his chair back slightly. He continued to stare at

Chuck, remaining motionless and silent.

Chuck shifted uneasily.

'You deaf, dummy?' he snarled.

'I can hear you and I can smell you,' Harry said quietly. 'Take the kiddies out of here. You and they are stinking up the place.'

Chuck reared back, making a hissing sound between his teeth. His thin vicious face drained white.

'No one talks that way to me,' he said. 'I'll . . .'

'Oh, run away,' Harry said. 'Ask your Mum to give you a bath.'

'Okay, creep,' Chuck said, his dirty hands closing into fists, 'you asked for it so you'll get it. Just for that we're going to wreck this joint and we're going to wreck you.'

'I wouldn't,' Harry said, shifting his chair back an inch or so more. He was now clear of the table and his hand dropped out of sight onto the club. 'You'll only get hurt. I don't like hurting little boys . . .'

He stopped short as Chuck caught hold of the nearest table and tipped it over. The glasses and cutlery slid to the floor. The glasses smashed.

'Wreck the joint!' he yelled. 'Smash everything!'

Harry slid out from behind his table and moved so swiftly he was within hitting range before Chuck realised he had left the table. The club smashed down on Chuck's forearm. The bone snapped, making a sound like the breaking of dry wood. Chuck fell on his knees, screaming and yammering with agony.

Harry sprang away from Chuck and faced the others. The savage, fighting expression on his face seemed to chill them for they all backed away.

'Beat it!' he shouted at them. 'Out . . . fast!'

As they hesitated, Harry moved again. He made a fainting move towards the youngest of the pack who squealed with fright and jumped back, then his club swished through the air and thudded down on the shoulder of the second eldest kid, driving him to his knees, howling with pain.

'Out!' Harry shouted again.

The girl spat in Harry's direction, then turned and ran. The two younger kids fought each other to get through the doorway. The second eldest kid got to his feet, clutching his shoulder and staggered to the door. As he reached it, Harry's foot shot out and his heavy walking shoe caught the kid on the tip of his spine, propelling him forward so he crashed down the steps and rolled into the road.

Harry went over to where Chuck was still kneeling, sobbing and moaning, holding his broken arm.

'Out!' he said. 'Fast!'

Cringing away from him, Chuck staggered to his feet and

blundered into the night.

Harry went out onto the stoop. He watched the pack running down the street. None of them stopped to help Chuck who staggered after them, moaning.

Harry shut the restaurant door and crossed to the bar. He looked over at the crouching man.

‘They’ve gone,’ he said. “I guess you could use a drink.’

The man rose to his feet. He was still shaking and his eyes were still scared.

‘I - I guess they would have killed me if they’d found me,’ he said, leaning against the bar.

‘Take it easy.’ To give him time to recover his nerve, Harry went over to the upset table and set it on its feet.

Maria, followed by her father who was quaking a little, came out of the kitchen ‘I’m sorry about that,’ Harry said to Maria. ‘I shouldn’t have let him smash the glasses.’

‘You were wonderful! I saw everything!’ Maria looked adoringly at him. ‘If you hadn’t been here we wouldn’t have had a thing left.’

Harry grinned.

‘Can you take care of our friend? He’s got a nasty cut.’

Maria surveyed the cut, nodded and ran into the kitchen.

Morelli caught hold of Harry’s hand and pumped it vigorously.

‘That was a fine thing you did! Everyone around here is scared of that trash. Thank you, mister. We need men like you.’

Embarrassed, Harry said, ‘Let’s all have a drink.’ He turned to the man with the guitar. ‘How about a Scotch?’

‘I’m Randy Roache,’ the man said and thrust out his hand. ‘Yeah! I sure could use a Scotch.’

‘Harry Mitchell,’ Harry said and shook hands. ‘Let’s all have a Scotch.’

Beaming, Morelli set up the drinks as Maria returned with a bowl of hot water, a towel and some adhesive plaster. She quickly stopped the bleeding and applied the plaster. Randy thanked her, then reached for his Scotch and waved the glass in Harry’s direction.

‘Thanks, pal. They were after my guitar. I ran into them a mile back. I got away. I was just that bit faster than they were. If it hadn’t been for you I’d have lost my guitar and my job.’

Harry sipped his Scotch, then asked, ‘Where are you heading for?’

‘Paradise City. You on the road too?’

‘Yes and going the same way.’ Harry turned to Morelli. ‘How about that apple pie I was promised?’ He looked at Randy. ‘Have you eaten yet? The special here is tops.’

Randy said he would have the special and the two men went over to Harry’s table and sat down while Morelli bustled into the kitchen.

Maria began cutting up more bread.

'If you are heading for Paradise City we could go together,' Randy said, looking hopefully at Harry. 'It's safer for two than for one.'

'Sure,' Harry said. 'Glad to.'

Maria came over with a plate of spaghetti and a vast slice of apple pie topped with ice cream. She set the plates down.

'Dad says it's all on the house,' she said, her eyes sparkling. 'And the room too.'

'Oh, now . . . look . . .' Harry began, embarrassed, but Maria shook her head.

'That's what Dad says and what Dad says goes.'

She went back into the kitchen.

Harry looked at Randy and lifted his shoulders.

'Nice people . . . they didn't have to do that.'

'I don't know I reckon you saved their restaurant. Those junkies were stoned. If there's anything I can do to even the score just name it,' Randy said earnestly. 'If I had lost my guitar, I'd really be in a fix. I rely on it to make a living.' He forked up some spaghetti then went on, 'I've got a nice job waiting for me at Paradise City. This makes the third season I've worked there: a nice, high-class restaurant, lots of style, run by a Mex and his daughter. A bit like this set up here, but much more style and the daughter . . . He rolled his eyes. 'She has to be seen to be believed.'

He ate for a moment. 'Say! This is some spaghetti!'

Harry nodded.

'Some pie too. When do you reckon to start work?'

'As soon as I get there.' Randy paused, swallowed, then asked, 'Are you looking for a job?'

'Yes. What chance do I have? I'm not fussy what I do.'

Randy regarded him thoughtfully.

'I might get you fixed up with Solo . . . he runs this restaurant: Solo Dominico. He will be hiring staff pretty soon. Can you swim?'

'Swim?' Harry grinned. 'I guess that's about the one thing I can do well. I was a winner of a bronze medal at the last Olympics for free style and diving.'

Randy gaped at him.

'The Olympics! For God's sake I You're not putting me on?'

'No . . . straight.'

Randy twiddled more spaghetti onto his fork.

'When you were in the Army, did you get to Vietnam?'

'Served my three years out there . . . what's that to do with it?'

Randy laughed and patted Harry's arm.

'Then I can guarantee you a job. Solo's son is serving out there. The old man will flip his lid for the chance of talking first hand to a

guy just back, and besides, he has to hire a lifeguard for his beach . . . it's compulsory by law to have a qualified swimmer and he has a hell of a job finding anyone for the job. Those who can swim well don't want to do the chores . . . setting up the umbrellas, keeping the beach clean, serving drinks: those who'll do the chores can't swim.' Randy grinned. 'Would a job like that be okay with you? He won't pay much, but it's dead easy and the food is terrific.'

'It'd suit me fine. But maybe he's already fixed up.'

'It's my bet he isn't. The season doesn't start for another week. Solo is careful with his money. He won't look for anyone until the last moment.'

'What's your job with him?'

'I take care of the bar and do a couple of singing spots at dinnertime and one at lunchtime. This restaurant is pretty snazzy. Solo gets a lot of the Cadillac trade: it isn't a dump like this.'

'Sounds fine,' Harry finished his apple pie, sighed contentedly and sat back to light a cigarette.

'How long do you reckon it'll take to get there?'

'Depends if we have luck in getting rides. I'm a nightwalker. It's safer that way. These hippies travel by day. By walking at night, we'll avoid them, but there is less chance of getting a ride. I'd say three days if we have luck, four if we don't.'

'Well, I'm in no rush,' Harry said. 'I like the idea of walking by night . . . less hot. I sure got burned today.'

'That's it. We can walk faster and further at night. Look, suppose we start tomorrow evening, around seven? We can keep here, take it easy all day and then walk all through the night.'

Harry nodded. The idea appealed to him. He pushed back his chair and got to his feet.

'I'll fix it with the girl.'

He went over to the bar where Maria was washing glasses.

'We figure to leave here tomorrow evening. Would that be all right with you and your Dad?' he asked.

'After what you've done for us,' Maria said seriously, 'anything's all right with us. If you two want baths, the water's hot . . . if there's anything else, just ask.'

'A bath would be fine.'

'I'll go up and fix the bed. Do you want a bath now?'

'Why not? I'll come up with you.'

He went over to Randy who was about to start on the pork chops Morelli had brought from the kitchen. He told him he was taking a bath and they'd meet sometime during the following morning.

Morelli again shook hands with him and again thanked him for saving his restaurant. He watched Harry mount the stairs with Maria.

‘That’s a fine man,’ he said to Randy. ‘That’s a man I’d like to have for a son.’

‘You’re right,’ Randy said and cut into his chop. When Morelli had returned to the kitchen, Randy paused in his eating, his expression suddenly thoughtful. Suppose Solo wouldn’t hire this guy? he thought. There were times when Solo was pigheaded and couldn’t be persuaded. After all, Randy told himself, Harry had saved his life and his guitar. He had better check. When he had finished his meal, he shut himself in the telephone booth and called Solo’s restaurant. He spoke to Joe, the negro barman who told him Solo wasn’t there.

‘This is important, Joe,’ Randy said, squirming with impatience. ‘Where can I call him?’

Joe gave him an out of town telephone number.

‘Where’s that, for God’s sake?’ Randy demanded, scratching the number on the wall of the booth with his fingernail.

‘I wouldn’t know,’ Joe said. ‘It’s only if it’s important.’

Randy broke the connection, inserted more coins in the box and dialled the number.

Solo’s deep, growling voice came on the line.

‘Yes . . . hey? Who is it?’

‘Remember me?’ Randy said. ‘Randy Roache. I’m on my way. I’ve got you a lifeguard, Solo . . . an Olympic champ. Now listen . . .’

Chapter Two

They had been walking now for some three hours.

The moon hung in the cloudless sky casting black shadows and sharply lighting the white dust road. The air was still and hot, and on either side of the road dense mangrove thickets made a solid black wall.

They walked silently: Harry just ahead: both of them preoccupied with their thoughts, but aware of each other and contented not to be alone.

They had left Yellow Acres soon after 19.00 hours. Each had been given a large wrapped parcel which Morelli had said was a little snack in case they became hungry during the walk. There had been a lot of hand shaking, and Harry had promised to look in on his way back.

He was now thinking of Maria, comparing her to the girl he had spent two nights with in New York who continually called him 'Ducky', chain smoked even when they were making love and was as full of boring problems as a pod is full of peas. He wondered about Maria's ease of manner and her apparent simplicity.

Maybe, he thought, she too had problems, but was in control of herself. He rubbed the back of his neck, thinking. Everyone had problems these days. It depended on how they coped with them. Some people could manage alone: others had to talk about them: others couldn't stop talking about them. It was a matter of personal pride to him not to weary others with his own problems. He grimaced ruefully. He had plenty of them, but this wasn't the time to think of them. He had developed a built-in mechanism that controlled his thoughts. The three years in Vietnam were not to be thought of. His ruined domestic life wasn't to be thought of nor the crap game on the ship he had stupidly got into that practically cleaned him out of all the money the Army had presented him with for services rendered.

Oh yes, he had plenty of problems but this was the wrong time to think about them. At least, the job at the restaurant seemed certain. Randy had told him he had telephoned Solo and Solo was very interested.

Randy said suddenly, 'A couple of miles further on, we come to the highway.' He paused to look at his watch in the light of the moon. 'Half after ten. With any luck we could get a ride.'

He drew level with Harry. 'The highway should be free of hikers by now.'

'How's your head feeling?' Harry asked.

'It's all right . . . aches a bit and is sore, but all right.' Randy

glanced at him curiously. 'I'm still thrown by the way you handled those kids. You broke his arm . . . you know that, don't you?'

'Does that worry you?' There was a sudden edge to Harry's voice.

'No. It doesn't worry me . . . still . . . a broken arm.'

'So it does worry you. Have you been in the Army?'

'Me?' Randy made a mock gesture of horror. 'Not likely! I burned my draft card. Catch me being shanghaied to Vietnam!'

'Someone has to go.'

'Okay . . . but not me.'

'What's so special about you then?'

'I just don't dig for some fat old bastard controlling my life. The draft board is loaded with fat old bastards who would blow their stacks if someone sent them out there. Why should they have the right to send me?'

Harry laughed.

'You have a point.' He walked in silence for a while, then said abruptly, 'If I'd known what I was going into, I might have burned my draft card too, but at the time it seemed a good idea . . . an escape.'

'An escape from what?' Randy asked curiously.

'This and that.'

'Plenty of ways of escaping without going out there.'

'They can get rough with a draft dodger.'

'They have to catch him first,' Randy said complacently.

'What makes you think they won't catch you?'

'They haven't so far. I worry when things happen, not when they don't.'

'Like when I broke that junkie's arm?'

Randy shifted his duffel bag from one shoulder to the other.

'I don't say I really worry about it, but it looked as if you meant to bust his arm. I mean it wasn't an accident. You sure gave him a hell of a belt.'

'That's right. I did mean to break his arm. One thing, among many others, you learn in the army is not to make a mistake in a fight. If you have to hit a guy, then you hit him so he stays hit. If I had tapped that junkie, the rest of them would have been all over me. They were higher than kites. By busting his arm, I shocked them sober, and I had to shock them sober. By busting his arm, I stopped them giving you the treatment.' He glanced at Randy. 'Still worrying?'

'You have a point,' Randy said and grinned.

Ten minutes later they reached the highway and Randy put down his guitar and duffel bag.

'Let's wait here for half an hour and see what turns up,' he said. 'We could be lucky. Around fifty miles on is an all-night snack bar. Most truckers stop there. If we can get a ride there, we are almost

certain to find some trucker going to Miami and after Miami there's no trouble.'

They waited by the roadside. After some minutes, the headlights of a big truck came over the distant hill. Randy stepped out onto the road and began waving. The truck thundered past, the driver ignoring Randy's thumb. Randy muttered under his breath while Harry sat down on the grass verge and lit a cigarette. Both men watched the road. Four trucks went by during the next fifteen minutes, each ignoring Randy's thumb.

'It could be quicker to walk,' Harry said. 'I don't think they fancy you.'

'Give it another quarter of an hour. Could be the creeps don't like the way I wear my hair. Suppose you try?'

They changed places, but it didn't help them to get a ride.

Three more trucks stormed by without stopping.

Randy took off his Mexican boots and cooled his feet in the grass.

'Keep trying,' he encouraged. 'Every door is a door of opportunity.'

As he spoke a car's headlights showed over the hill. In the light of the moon Harry saw the car was a Mustang and it was towing a small two-berth caravan.

'Not a hope here,' he said, 'but I'll try.'

He moved further into the road so that the searching fingers of the headlights picked him out with the intensity of a spotlight. He jerked his thumb and put on his wide, disarming smile.

He heard the soft squealing of tyres biting into the tarmac as brakes were applied, and to his surprise the car slowed, came alongside him and stopped.

Hurriedly grabbing up his guitar and duffel bag in one hand and his boots in the other, Randy joined Harry.

Harry was peering at the driver 'Are you going to Miami?' he asked. 'Any chance of a ride, please?'

As he drew nearer, he could see in the reflected light from the dashboard that the driver was a girl and this startled him. He couldn't see anything of her face. She was wearing anti-dazzle, dark yellow goggles: a white scarf completely concealed her hair and the rest of her face. The ends of the scarf were tucked into a black open neck shirt.

He could feel the eyes hidden behind the goggles searching his face.

'Can you drive?'

Her voice was low and husky with a faint accent that Harry couldn't place.

'Why, sure.'

‘Got a driving license?’

‘Yes. I’m carrying it.’

The girl heaved a long, weary sigh.

‘That’s wonderful. You can have a ride if you’ll drive.’

‘Does that include me?’ Randy asked anxiously.

She turned her head and looked at him, then at Harry.

‘Is he a friend of yours?’ she asked.

‘Yes. He’s all right. He wears his hair like that to keep his head warm.’

‘You know the way?’

‘Straight ahead.’

‘That’s it. I’ve been driving eighteen hours. I’m bushed.’ She opened the car door and slid out. ‘If I don’t get some sleep, I’ll drive off the road. I’m delivering the caravan to Miami. The jerk who ordered it said he would cancel the order if he doesn’t get delivery tomorrow.’

All this seemed a little odd to Harry.

‘Are you in the caravan trade then?’

‘No, I’m one of the mugs who delivers. Get in and get going. I’m bedding down in the caravan. Don’t wake me for pity’s sake until you reach Miami.’

‘Are there two beds in there?’ Randy asked hopefully. ‘I’m dead on my feet too.’

‘If you can’t control this freak, then he stays on the road,’ the girl said to Harry and there was a snap in her voice that made Randy stiffen. ‘Get in and get going. She walked stiffly around to the back of the caravan. They heard the door open and then slam shut. They heard a bolt snap home.

The two men looked at each other, then Harry slid under the driving wheel.

‘Come on, freak,’ he said, ‘unless you want to walk.’

Randy bolted around the car, jerked open the offside door and got in beside Harry who set the car surging forward.

‘Well, what do you know?’ Randy said. Talk about luck! We could be in Miami by seven o’clock.’

‘Could be luck or something else,’ Harry returned. ‘Do girls ferry caravans for eighteen hours non-stop these days? I wouldn’t know. I’m three years out of date.’

‘Let me tell you, Van Winkle, ol’ pal, ol’ pal,’ Randy said, grinning. ‘The dolls do everything these days. That’s what’s the matter with them. They have no respect for us men either . . . widow spiders, all of them!’

‘Pretty cool,’ Harry said thoughtfully, ‘stopping like that and then handing us this car. She could have got knocked on the head and

raped for all she knew.'

'They like being raped: it's their new occupational pastime,' Randy said bitterly. 'I bet she was disappointed to find you were an old-fashioned gentleman.'

'Take a look in the glove compartment See if she's left any papers in there,' Harry said. The speedometer needle was now steady at 50 m.p.h.

Randy opened the glove compartment and found a plastic folder. He took out some papers, turned on the map light and leaning forward, examined them.

After reading, he sat back.

'This is a Hertz hired car, rented at Vero Beach to Joel Black, 1244, Springfield Road, Cleveland.'

'Have they logged the mileage?'

'Yeah, 1,550 miles.'

Harry looked at the mileage counter on the dashboard. He did a sum in his head.

'Since this car was hired, it has driven 240 miles. Not what you would call an eighteen hour drive.'

Randy turned and stared at him.

'Do you always act like this? You sound like a fuzz.'

'She isn't Joel Whatever his name is. She hasn't been driving eighteen hours. I don't like it She might have stolen this car.'

'Look,' Randy said earnestly, 'don't let's push our luck. We have a car. We will be in Miami by seven. From there we will waltz to Paradise City. We can even go by bus if we can't thumb a ride. So what do we care?'

'You'll care if there's an alarm out for this car and some cop stops us.'

'Oh, for Pete's sake! At this time of night and on this highway, the cops are in bed.'

Harry hesitated. There was something wrong about this setup which he didn't like, but he told himself that it was the girl's business. If they were stopped by the police, he would have no difficulty in clearing himself. If Randy was willing to take the risk why should he worry?

He gently squeezed more pressure on the gas pedal and the speedometer climbed to 65 m.p.h.

'Have you calmed down?' Randy asked.

'It's your headache. I don't risk a thing. If you don't care, why should I?'

'That's my boy.' Randy reached into his duffel bag and found the parcel Morelli had given him. 'My worms are beginning to gnaw at me.' He undid the parcel and found a roast chicken, neatly quartered,

two doughnuts and four slices of buttered bread, smeared with mayonnaise. That Wop certainly knows his food. You want something to eat?’

‘Not now.’

‘Well, I do.’ Randy began to eat contentedly. With his mouth full, he said, ‘Talking about girls: how were they in Vietnam?’

‘You won’t be going there so why should you care?’ Harry said curtly.

Randy looked at him, bit into the bread, munched for a long moment, then said, ‘Do they do it in the usual way or do they do something different?’

‘You won’t be going there so why should you care?’ Harry repeated, staring at the road ahead, lighted by the powerful headlights.

Randy grimaced.

‘Excuse me for speaking. Yeah . . . why should I care?’ He tossed a chicken bone out of the window and helped himself to a thick slice of the breast.

Harry thought nostalgically of the Vietnamese girl he had left in Saigon. Whenever he had come out of the front line he had found her waiting. She had made a precarious living selling cooked food at a street corner. He had always marvelled that she was able to carry the cooking stove and the sundry pots, slung on a bamboo pole on her shoulder. She had always reminded him of a beautiful butterfly in her pink cheongsam, but he had learned later just how durable and how strong she had been.

She had become the most precious thing in his life during those three dreary years: a thought to cling to during the dark, frightening nights. She represented to him tenderness, interest and love and when she had been blown to pieces along with others by a Viet Cong bomb Harry hadn’t looked at another woman out there, nor could he bring himself to talk about the Vietnam girls neither with his buddies nor with men like Randy who had seen pictures of them and thought they were just companions in bed.

Any suggestive talk about them turned Harry sour. His girl, who had been so much fun, so dependable, always waiting for him, represented to him the women of Vietnam, slighting one meant slighting her.

In the wing mirror, he saw the headlights of a car some half mile behind him and he eased the pressure on the gas pedal. There was a 60 m.p.h. speed limit on this highway and the car behind him might be a patrol car. He wasn’t taking any unnecessary risks.

Randy, noticing the fall off of speed, glanced at him.

‘Car behind,’ Harry explained.

He looked in the mirror again. The car was driving at his speed. It remained half a mile behind.

‘The cops are in bed,’ Randy said. ‘I know this road, I’ve never seen a cop on it after eleven o’clock.’

‘All the same, sixty is fast enough.’

Randy lit a cigarette and slouched back.

‘You sure you don’t want to eat? I can drive.’

‘Not yet’

‘I’d dig for a good, strong cup of coffee.’

‘That’s something I could use.’

‘About fifteen minutes will bring us to that all-night snack bar I was telling you about. They have good coffee there. Let’s stop. Won’t take us five minutes. Maybe the doll could use a cup too.’

‘She said we weren’t to wake her until we get to Miami,’ Harry reminded him. ‘If she wants to sleep, let her sleep.’

‘Did you get a look at her?’

‘No more than you did.’

‘She could be dishy.’

‘So why should you care, freak?’

Randy laughed.

‘That’s the great thing about Solo’s place. It’s alive with dolls. As a lifeguard you’ll have all you can handle. Working behind the bar puts a crimp in my style. I don’t get the opportunities you’ll get. Solo advertises swimming lessons and you’ll handle that Boy! Wouldn’t I like that job! Cuddling a lush babe in the sea is my idea of good living!’

‘You’re still a bit of a kid, aren’t you?’ Harry said with a friendly grin.

‘So what’s wrong with being a kid?’

‘Nothing. Maybe I’m envying you.’

‘Hey you sound as if you were my father! You’re not telling me you don’t dig for dolls?’

Harry thought of his wife lying in the bath with her wrists slashed. He thought of Nhan smeared in a bloody mess against a brick wall. The other women in his life too were uneasy ghosts. He couldn’t think of one of them that he could remember with pleasure.

‘I wouldn’t want to be your father,’ he said, sidestepping the question.

Randy laughed and began to eat a doughnut.

‘While we are talking about dolls,’ he said with his mouth full, I’ll give you the photo about Nina.

Harry glanced into the wing mirror. The headlights of the car behind him remained at its half-mile distance.

‘Nina?’

‘Yes . . . Solo’s daughter. Maybe I should tell you about Solo first. Twenty years back, Solo was the best peterman in the business. There wasn’t a safe he couldn’t open if he wanted to. The Cops finally caught up with him and he went away for fifteen years. While he was doing his time Nina was born and Mrs. Solo died. When he came out he decided to retire from the racket and he set up this restaurant in Paradise City. He is still considered the best peterman in the game and from time to time he gets propositioned to come out of retirement, but nothing will shift him. He has a good business: he makes a decent profit, and he has Nina.’ Randy paused while he rummaged in the depleted parcel and found the second doughnut. ‘You must treat Solo carefully.

Although he’s over fifty, he’s real tough, mean and rough when he’s in the mood. He acts as his own bouncer, and if a drunk looks for trouble. Solo handles him. I’ve seen Solo handle three punks who got too close to Nina and those three punks landed in the hospital. But Solo is broad minded. He doesn’t mind the staff playing the dolls so long as the dolls are pleased too, but no one and that includes you and me, tries to get close to Nina.’ Randy paused to bite into the doughnut. He munched for a moment, then went on, ‘I’m telling you this because I don’t want you to run into trouble. Nina is something pretty special. You have to see her to understand just how special she is. When I first saw her, I didn’t sleep for a couple of nights. I guess I couldn’t keep my eyes off her and Manuel - he’s the Captain of Waiters - warned me. He said Nina was strictly for the birds. If I started something with her, Solo would finish it for me, and when I say finish, I mean just that.’

Harry moved impatiently.

‘Look, Randy,’ he said, ‘I appreciate what you are telling me, but another thing the Army taught me was not to do it on my own doorstep. If I work for Solo, then his daughter will be just another sun umbrella to me.’

Randy wiped the sugar off his mouth with the back of his hand.

‘Don’t be that sure. You haven’t seen her yet.’

‘That’s right: I haven’t seen her, but I’m about four years older than you and that makes a difference. When I need a woman I find one without complications. I’m old enough not to get involved with a woman who could make complications.’

‘Boy! You sound worse than my old man who was always talking like that,’ Randy said. ‘Anyway, I thought it had better come from me than from Manuel. You mightn’t like him. He isn’t your type. He isn’t my type either. If he can make trouble for a guy, he makes it. But you don’t have to worry about him. You’ll be an outside man, directly under Solo. It’s my bet Manuel will take one look at you and leave you

alone.'

'What does the daughter do?' Harry asked.

'She handles the office, the reservations and the accounts. In the evening she circulates in the bar and the restaurant. Solo does the marketing and the cooking. It's one of the three top restaurants in the City and that's saying something. The competition is fierce, but it doesn't faze Solo. He really knows his job.'

Ahead, Harry saw a big flashing sign that spelt out in red and yellow lettering: *Snacks – Twenty-Four Hour Service.*

'This is the place,' Randy said. 'Best coffee this side of Paradise City.'

'We'll stop then,' Harry said. 'Then you can drive and I'll eat.'

'Sure. Think we should wake the doll?'

'Let her be.'

Harry slowed the Mustang as they approached the brightly lit cafe. In the layby were four big trucks and several dusty cars.

Harry found room and manoeuvred the Mustang and the caravan into a space between two trucks.

'Don't let's waste time,' he said and slid out of the car. He paused for a moment to look back along the highway. The headlights of the car that had been behind them were rapidly approaching. Randy was already at the door of the cafe and Harry joined him. They entered the big room where four burly truckers were sitting up at the counter, eating and drinking coffee. A few men, obviously from the cars, were at the tables scattered around the room: most of them looked like tired salesmen. Some of them were checking through papers while they drank coffee: a few were eating the night special which Harry saw was a sticky looking goulash.

He and Randy went to the bar and ordered coffee. Harry offered his Camels and they lit up. The truckers eyed Randy. Harry could tell by their expressions none of them had time for a guy who wore his hair that long.

Harry heard a car arrive and stop. He glanced out of the window near him. He could see a white Mercedes SL 180 and he wondered if it was the car that had been behind him. He stepped closer to the window, but the car was already on the move again.

He just had time to see the man at the wheel was wearing a slouch hat, but it was too dark to see his features. With a powerful purr of the engine, the Mercedes went shooting off into the darkness.

'How's this for coffee?' Randy asked.

Harry sipped from his cup and nodded. Any coffee tasted fine after Army coffee. He bought two packs of Camels and asked the counter hand if he could let him have a pint carton of coffee to take on the road.

Five minutes later, they were back in the Mustang with Randy at the wheel.

Still puzzled about the girl driver, Harry opened the glove compartment and examined for himself the Hertz rental contract. As Randy had told him the car was rented to Joel Blach of

Cleveland. The contract had been issued at Vero Beach, dated two days ago. Again he checked the mileage . . . a mere 240 miles. Why had the girl told him she had been driving for eighteen hours? Harry considered this a blatant lie. The only reason he could think of was that it offered an excuse to turn the driving over to him. But why? Had she some reason to keep out of sight? Was the car stolen? He thought that was unlikely since she was travelling with them and if the police stopped him, she too would be in trouble.

‘Are you still doing a Marlow act?’ Randy asked, glancing at Harry’s thoughtful expression, lit by the map lamp. Harry shrugged and put the Hertz papers back in the glove compartment.

‘I don’t like anything that puzzles me,’ he said. ‘And this setup puzzles me.’

‘Why not ask her to explain when she wakes up? Why batter your brains when she can tell you?’

‘Yeah.’ Harry began opening the parcel Morelli had given him. The coffee had made him hungry.

‘If you don’t want the second doughnut, I’ll help out,’ Randy said hopefully.

‘I do want it. You’ve had enough already.’

‘My pal!’ Randy said with mock bitterness. ‘You’re not planning to eat all that chicken, are you?’

‘I’m going to have a damn good try!’

Randy shook his head incredulously.

‘Didn’t the army teach you among other things to share and share alike?’

‘Why should you care?’ Harry said and bit into a chicken leg.

* * *

‘Hey, wake up!’

Harry stirred, yawned and opened his eyes. He stared through the dusty windshield at the yellow, red and pearl grey sky and at the palm trees that flashed by as the Mustang swept along the highway.

‘We’ve just gone through Fort Lauderdale,’ Randy told him. ‘We’ll be in Miami in twenty minutes.’

Harry rubbed his hand over his face, feeling the stubble of his beard. He hated sleeping in his clothes although during his time in the Army it was an accepted thing but he had never got used to it. He

longed for a shave, a cold shower and coffee.

'Let's stop at the first cafe. We'll wake the girl up and see where in Miami she wants to drop us.'

'I'm going to miss this car,' Randy said regretfully. 'There's a cafe coming up now.'

The small wooden building with its glaring neon sign was just off the highway. Lights showed in the windows. As Randy slowed, Harry glanced at his watch. The time was 05.15 hours.

He grimaced. A hell of a time, he thought, to wake up.

As Randy pulled up, Harry opened the door.

'I'll get a couple of cartons of coffee. You wake her up.'

Randy smirked.

'It'll be my pleasure. You know something? I really think you don't dig for dolls.'

'Oh, shut up!' Harry snapped. He wasn't in the mood for Randy's corny humour. He went into the cafe.

A sleepy looking negro was behind the counter. He regarded Harry without enthusiasm.

'Two cartons of strong coffee,' Harry said, coming to rest at the counter. 'Black, and lots of sugar.'

'You want doughnuts?'

Harry didn't, but he thought the girl might and he was sure Randy would.

'Four, please.'

He watched the negro pour coffee into the wax containers.

The smell of the coffee made his nose twitch. He lit a cigarette, coughed as the smoke bit at the back of his throat.

The negro put four doughnuts into a paper sack.

'Ain't you afraid of lung cancer, mister?' he asked as he pushed the sack across the counter.

'Does it scare you?' Harry asked, taking a dollar from his billfold.

'I don't smoke.'

Harry stared at him,

'So why should you care about me?'

The negro blinked, shrugged and took the dollar.

'And thirty cents.'

Harry added the money and as he picked up the two cartons, he heard the horn of the Mustang give two sharp bleeps. He frowned picked up the sack of doughnuts and walked quickly to the door.

Randy was sitting behind the driving wheel. As soon as he saw Harry, he made an urgent gesture to hurry.

Harry crossed to the car and stared at Randy through the open window. One look at Randy's pallid, sweating face told him something bad had happened. He didn't wait to ask questions. He opened the car

door and slid into the passenger's seat and slammed the door.

Randy sent the Mustang racing along the highway. He was practically standing on the gas pedal.

'What is it?' Harry asked quietly, 'and cut your speed. Do you imagine you're on a racetrack. Cut your speed!'

Randy shivered. He passed his hand over his sweating face, but Harry's quiet firm voice steadied him. He eased the speed down to 65 m.p.h.

'She's dead,' he said, his voice quivering. 'There's blood on the blanket and she's as stiff as a board.'

Harry felt a little jolt inside him: a small, controlled explosion of shock. The first sight he had of Randy's face had told him it would be bad, but he hadn't expected it to be this bad.

'Where do you think you're going?' he said, his voice even and quiet. 'Pull up! I'll take a look.'

'We don't stop on this highway,' Randy said wildly. 'The cops start patrolling any time now! I'm not going to be caught with a body! They'll think we killed her!'

Harry's face tightened. He hadn't thought of that possibility. Yes . . . if a cop stopped them and found . . . He stamped down on a tiny spark of panic and extinguished it.

'You're sure she's dead?'

'I'm sure. I knocked on the door and there was no answer so I tried the door and it opened,' Randy gulped, swallowed, then went on. 'She was on the lower berth, covered with a blanket. There was a smell in there that turned me over. Then I saw a smear of blood on the blanket. I nearly flipped. I called to her, then leaned in and took hold of her arm. That was enough for me. It was like catching hold of a lump of wood.'

Ahead of them, Harry saw a turning with a signpost that read: 'Beach. Safe Swimming.'

'Turn off here,' he said, 'and cut your speed.' He looked into the wing mirror. The highway was deserted.

Randy slowed and steered the car and caravan down the dirt road. They drove in tense silence for about half a mile. The road opened out onto a vast stretch of golden sand, surrounded by shrubs and hillocks. Some two hundred yards beyond the hillocks was the sea.

'Pull up here,' Harry said. 'The caravan will explain what we are doing. Anyone seeing us will think we've spent the night here.'

Randy stopped the car by a grass-covered sand dune. He began to shake as soon as he tinned the engine off.

'Get hold of yourself,' Harry said sharply. He thrust a carton of coffee into Randy's shakes hand. 'Drink some of this!'

'I can't. I'll throw up!' Randy moaned.

'Come on!'

Randy stared with revulsion at the carton. Losing patience Harry slid out of the car.

'Stay here. I'll take a look.'

He walked over the soft sand to the rear of the caravan. He paused to look right and left. The two miles of beach was deserted except for a few gulls walking by the surf. The grey had gone out of the sky now and the yellow and red were dissolving into a soft blue as the sun began to rise.

He took out his handkerchief, put it over the handle of the caravan door and turned it, pulling the door open. The smell of death he had lived with for the past three years came out of the caravan making him grimace. He could see a huddled form, completely covered by a grey blanket, lying on the lower berth. There was a long smear of dried blood on the lower end of the blanket as Randy had described.

Harry stepped into the caravan and lifted the blanket, drawing it back and letting it drop.

He looked down at the face of a man well into his fifties in spite of a thick thatch of dark brown hair: a thin, sun burned face with a small beaky nose, a mean lipless mouth and ice grey eyes that stared up at Harry in a terror that remained in spite of death.

The right side of the face carried a livid bruise. The sharp, yellowing teeth revealed by the lips drawn back were bloodstained and gave to the dead face a snarling, animal defiance.

Harry shifted his eyes and looked quickly around the caravan and then into the top bunk. The dead man was the only occupant.

'She's dead, isn't she?' Randy quavered. He had come around to the back of the caravan, but was standing well away from it, watching Harry with sick, scared eyes.

Harry stepped out of the caravan and fumbled for his pack of Camels. He lit a cigarette, noting his hands were rock steady. But then, he thought, he had lived with dead, stinking bodies for so long: another was merely a problem.

'She's gone . . . it's a man,' he said and drew in a deep lungful of smoke.

A light breeze that sprang up to herald the sun, wafted the smell of death to Randy. He paled, turned away and began to vomit. Harry walked to the Mustang, found the carton of coffee and drank deeply. The lukewarm coffee cleared the taste in his mouth. He leaned against the side of the car, holding the carton, his mind busy.

From the moment he had caught the girl in the lie that she had been driving eighteen hours, he had been uneasy. He should have

trusted his instinct and have tackled her as soon as he knew she was lying.

Shrugging, he went to where Randy was now sitting on the sand, holding his head in his hands and stood over him.

‘Did you stop any time while I was asleep?’

Randy looked up.

‘No. I kept moving the whole time. Has she gone?’

Harry squatted down beside him.

‘Yes, she’s gone. This guy has been dead some time . . . forty-eight hours: could be more than that. It’s my bet he was in the caravan when she picked us up. She must have sneaked out of the caravan when we were at that cafe.’ He suddenly remembered the white Mercedes. ‘The Mercedes that was following us! It stopped for a few moments outside the cafe. That’s it! He was behind us all the time, waiting for us to stop. When we did stop, she switched to the Mercedes.’ He stared at the sea, frowning. ‘It could be this dead man is Joel Blach who hired the car from Hertz.’

Randy got hurriedly to his feet. There was panic in his eyes.

‘Let’s get the hell away from here!’

Harry stared up at him.

‘Sit down!’ The snap in his voice got obedience from Randy who sat down again. ‘You don’t seem to realise the jam we’re in,’ Harry went on. ‘When the police find the caravan and what’s in it, they’ll start asking questions. You can bet someone has seen us with the Mustang. Once the police get a description of us, it won’t take them long to pick us up. Can you imagine how they will react when we tell them what happened? They’ll think this dead guy gave us a ride and we knocked him off for the car and his money . . . that’s the way they always think, and that’s what this girl wants them to think.’ He paused, frowning. ‘It was a deliberate plant. She was on the highway to dump the Mustang and the caravan on the first likely hitchhiker she came across. That explains why neither of us got a look at her. With those goggles and that head scarf she is a non-existent woman.’

Randy gnawed at his knuckles.

‘So what do we do?’

‘I want to know more about this guy.’

Harry ground out his cigarette and stood up.

He left Randy and walked to the caravan. Drawing a deep breath, he climbed in and pulled the blanket right off the body. He stood staring for a long moment, feeling his mouth turn dry and the muscles in his stomach contract.

The dead man’s left foot had been stripped of its sock and shoe. The flesh was charred and black. It was a stomach turning sight, and Harry hurriedly picked up the blanket and covered the foot.

He hesitated for a moment, then catching hold of the body, he half dragged, half carried it out into the daylight and laid it on the sand.

From where he sat, Randy watched in horror.

Harry went quickly through the dead man's pockets, but found nothing. All the pockets had been emptied and checking further he found the tailor's label in the inside pocket of the jacket had been ripped out.

He covered the body with the blanket, lit another cigarette and then joined Randy.

'He's been tortured. Someone put his foot in a fire and held it there. Otherwise he isn't touched except for a bruise on his face. My guess is he had a heart attack while they were burning him. Maybe they didn't mean to kill him. They must have been after information. From the look of his foot, he wouldn't talk, but of course he could have done before he died. I guess when they found they had a dead body on their hands they dreamed up this idea of planting it on some hippy hitchhiker who would automatically be in bad with the police.'

Randy licked his dry lips.

'Like me.'

'Yeah . . . like you.'

'W-what are we going to do then?'

'Get rid of him,' Harry said. 'There's nothing else we can do. We're in a jam so we're going to bury him. Then we dump the caravan somewhere from here. Then we dump the car somewhere from where we dump the caravan. That way we stand a chance of covering our trail. Make no mistake about it, if the police do catch up with us, they will hang this on us and they could make it stick. Now come on, let's start digging.'

He chose a sand dune a few yards off. Between them they scooped out a shallow hole big enough to take the body.

'We'll shift the sand from the dune down on top of him,' Harry said, surveying the hole, 'and make it one continuous dune. Give me a hand with him.'

Randy shuddered and backed away.

'I couldn't touch him! I'd throw up!'

Harry looked at his wristwatch. The time was 06.05 hours. Time was getting on. They had still to get rid of the car and the caravan. He went over to the body, caught hold of it by its right foot and dragged it across the sand to the grave.

Randy turned away and closed his eyes.

Harry rolled the body into the grave with his foot. The head banged against the side of the hollow as the body slid in. Then something happened that brought Harry out in a cold sweat.

The thick, heavily dyed thatch of brown hair on the dead man's head came away like a disarranged hat while the head, now completely bald and looking blue white in the rays of the sun sank into its pillow of sand.

For some seconds Harry remained motionless, fighting the saliva that rushed to his mouth, then he realised that the dead man had been wearing a wig that had completely deceived Harry into thinking it was a head of real hair.

He walked around the grave and with a grimace, picked up the wig between finger and thumb. He was about to toss it into the grave when he paused. He saw a small object strapped to the inside of the wig with a piece of adhesive plaster. He ripped away the plaster and found beneath it a bright steel key. Embossed on its shaft was the wording: Paradise City Airport. Locker 388.

His eyes narrowed. Was this what the killers had been looking for? The reason why they had so savagely tortured the dead man?

He dropped the wig into the grave and the key into his pocket.

'Come on, Randy!' he said sharply. 'Let's get him buried.'

Chapter Three

The Dominico Restaurant was ideally situated before a small bay guarded from the open sea by a series of sand banks. It was built under the shade of palms, cypress and spider orchid trees which formed a protection against the wind and the sun.

The restaurant was a long single storey building of hardwood with a palm-thatched roof and had direct access to the carefully raked sand leading in a gentle slope to the sea. Part of it was closed behind glass and air-conditioned: the rest was open for those who liked the heat and preferred the night breezes to eating in the cooler temperature rooms.

The beach had its own bar, its mattresses and sun umbrellas, neatly set out with enough space between each umbrella to give reasonable privacy.

Coming upon the restaurant from down a broad sandy road, Harry paused, surprised by its elegance, its style and its atmosphere of opulent luxury.

‘There it is,’ Randy said, a touch of pride in his voice. ‘Right now, you’re seeing it at its best: not a client in sight. In another week, it’ll be smothered with great tits, fat bottoms and inflated bellies. Then it doesn’t look so hot.’ He glanced at his watch. The time was just after 08.00 hours. ‘Solo could be at the market, but come on. Manuel will be here.’

They walked over to the building and into the shade of the veranda’s roof. As they paused amid the unset tables, a giant of a man came from the restaurant and out onto the veranda. His small, black eyes swept over Harry and then to Randy. His face lit up with a wide smile of welcome.

‘Randy . . . you small sonofabitch! So at last you arrive!’ An immense hairy hand engulfed Randy’s hand, pumped enthusiastically and the other hand descended on Randy’s back with an exploding report that made Randy stagger.

Harry guessed this was Solo Dominico, the owner of the restaurant.

During the brief welcome, he scrutinised Solo closely.

Wearing a white singlet and white cotton trousers, some six foot three in height and built like a gorilla, Dominico gave the impression of massive strength and authority. His swarthy complexion, his drooping black moustache, and his alert piercing eyes added to his picturesque appearance.

‘You all set to work?’ Dominico was demanding. ‘You going to

sing and play the box again?’

‘That’s what I’m here for,’ Randy said, rescuing his hand and shaking his numbed fingers ‘Solo, meet Harry Mitchell: ex-top sergeant, Paratroops, three years in Vietnam and an

Olympic swimmer, I told you about him. He’s looking for a job.’

Dominico turned to Harry. The two men looked directly at each other.

‘Vietnam, hey? You met my son: Sam Dominico: 3rd Company, Marines?’

‘No, I didn’t meet him, but I know of the 3rd Company: a fine outfit,’ Harry said.

‘You bet the Paratroopers are a fine outfit too.’ Dominico extended his hand. ‘You want a job? Can you swim?’

Harry shook hands. The grip that enfolded his fingers was firm and hard but not challenging. He had been prepared to squeeze back.

‘Swim? I told you!’ Randy said impatiently. ‘He nearly won a gold medal. Of course he can swim!’

‘I wasn’t talking to you.’ Dominico was still staring at Harry. ‘You want a lifeguard job? It pays thirty a week and all found. You want it?’

‘I’m looking for some sun and air,’ Harry said. ‘I’m not fussy what I do. If you want a lifeguard, I’ll be a lifeguard. Randy said there were chores . . . so okay, I’ll do chores.’

Dominico studied him then smiled.

‘So you’re hired. I’ve got to go to the market. I’m late now.’

He turned to Randy. ‘You take your old cabin. Harry can have the one next door. Show him . . . fix him up.’ He turned to Harry again. ‘This week is easy. The season starts next week. You just relax, get to know us, look around, have sun and air. Next week you start work. Okay, hey?’

‘Okay.’

Dominico was regarding Harry in an odd, quizzing way. Suddenly he reached forward and squeezed Harry’s right bicep.

‘Big man,’ he said, half to himself. ‘You carry a punch, Harry.’

‘I guess.’

‘You a fighting man?’

‘When I have to.’

‘So am I.’

Harry only just saw the punch coming, short, fast and deadly.

Instinctively, he weaved slightly, slipping the punch aimed at his chest so that Dominico’s fist scraped between his ribs and his arm and instinctively, he sank a short arm jab into Dominico’s massive side. It felt as if his fist had slammed against the door of a safe.

Dominico staggered, blinked and gulped.

They looked at each other, then Dominico grinned.

‘Smart boy: you don’t take a punch, but you can give one. That’s very smart. Can you take a punch, Harry?’

‘If I have to.’

Dominico laughed. He patted Harry’s shoulder.

‘I’m going to like you. You make yourself at home. We talk about Vietnam, hey? My son writes a very bad letter: like me. You tell me what goes on out there, hey?’

‘Sure,’ Harry said.

The fist came from nowhere, but Harry was watching for it. He shifted his head, letting the punch slide past his ear, a punch that could have knocked him cold. Again his jolting right slammed into the massive chest, and again Dominico staggered, blinked and gulped.

‘Very smart boy,’ he said as soon as he could speak. There was a rueful, admiring expression in his eyes. ‘We are going to be big friends. That’s a lovely punch.’ He regarded Harry, his head on one side ‘Beautiful avoiding action. You ever thought of turning pro?’

‘Mr. Dominico,’ Harry said quietly, looking directly into the black little eyes. ‘I want a job from you. I shouldn’t have hit you, but when anyone throws a punch at me, I hit back by instinct. I’m sorry.’

Dominico’s eyes opened wide.

‘Sorry? You don’t have to be sorry. I like a good punch. It shakes up my liver and that’s good for me. But I’ll tell you something if you weren’t so fast, that punch of mine would have put you away for a week.’

‘Is that right?’ Harry was very serious. ‘I’ll be glad to be a friend of yours, Mr. Dominico, but don’t throw any more punches at me. They make me nervous. I might not pull my punch the next time.’

Dominico lost his smile. His little eyes became quizzing.

‘So you pulled your punch, hey?’

‘I didn’t want to hurt you,’ Harry said.

This time Dominico’s punch nearly caught Harry. It scraped his chin as he shifted his head. The counter punch caught Dominico on the side of his jaw, flung him back against a table, smashed the table and laid him flat on his back. He lay there like a stranded whale, his eyes sightless, his great arms flung wide.

‘Judas!’ Randy gasped. ‘Are you crazy?’ He started forward, his eyes popping, but Harry caught hold of his arm.

‘Leave him alone. He’s all right,’ he said. ‘He likes a good punch. You heard him say so.’

Life came back into Dominico’s eyes. He stared up at Harry, screwed up his eyes, getting Harry into focus, then he grinned: not much of a grin, but a grin. He held out his enormous hand and Harry caught hold of it and hauled him to his feet.

‘The best goddamn punch I’ve ever taken.’ Dominico rubbed his jaw, his grin now very set. ‘Okay, Harry, no more games. You and me are going to be great friends. What did I say? Thirty bucks? For that punch I make it forty, and the best food: nothing but the best. You make yourself at home. Look after him, Randy.’ A little unsteadily, he lumbered away across the sand to where a Buick Estate Wagon was parked.

There was a long moment of silence as both Harry and Randy watched him get into the car and drive away, then Randy said awkwardly, ‘I’ll show you your pad.’ He didn’t look at Harry. His thin face revealed he was shocked and upset by what had happened.

‘No! Get him out of here!’

A girl whom Harry guessed was Nina Dominico had appeared in the doorway of the restaurant. The sight of her gave him a little jolt inside: as if he had touched a bare electric wire and had received a shock.

He remembered what Randy had said: Nina is pretty special. You have to see her to understand just how special she is. Well, he thought, Randy hadn’t been exaggerating. Probably twenty-two or three years of age, she was of average height but looked taller because of her slim build: a compact full-breasted body and long, tapering legs. Her hair, black as a raven’s wing, reached to her shoulders and was parted in the middle, forming a frame for her face that had a wild sensual beauty that moved Harry as he had never been moved before. Right at this moment, Nina Dominico was in a flaming rage and he thought her tigerish expression and her flashing black eyes made her the most exciting woman he had ever seen.

‘I don’t like your friend, Randy!’ she said, her voice shaking with the fury that boiled out of her. ‘Take him away! The sight of him sickens me!’

Harry’s face tightened and the colour of his eyes changed from blue to steel grey.

‘What’s the trouble, Miss Dominico?’ he asked quietly.

‘You!’ She moved from the doorway and planted herself in front of him. He looked down at her. She was wearing a scarlet halter that emphasised the fullness of her breasts and white stretch pants that set off the solid curve of her small hips and the length of her legs. ‘Why don’t you hit someone your own age, you cowardly thug?’

‘Are you telling me your father can’t look after himself?’

Harry was very aware of her creamy flawless skin.

‘When a guy looks for trouble the way your father looks for it, sooner or later, he is certain to find it. I’m sorry you are upset. I would be even more sorry if I had been a dummy and let him land a punch on me.’

'If you imagine you're getting a job here, you have another thing coming!' she cried. 'I won't have you here. Get out and stay out!'

Harry's face remained expressionless.

'I don't take orders from little girls. Your father has hired me. If he tells me to go, I'll go, but not on your say-so.'

She swung her hand in a wild, vicious slap but Harry had no trouble in swaying out of range. The violence of her unconnecting swing made her stagger forward and thud against him. He felt for a brief moment the swell of her breasts against his chest before she jumped back. She stood panting and glaring at him and shaking with fury.

'What's going on?'

A small man wearing black trousers, an open neck white shirt and a scarlet sash around his waist had come out onto the veranda.

Harry immediately disliked his small, mean eyes and mouth and the arrogant way he stood.

'Manuel!' Nina screamed. 'Tell this thug to get out! See him off!' She swung around and ran past Manuel and disappeared into the restaurant.

Manuel eyed Harry, then looked inquiringly at Randy.

'Who's this? Did you bring him here?'

Randy shuffled his feet uneasily.

'He's the new lifeguard. Solo hired him just now.'

Manuel's little eyes narrowed.

'So what's she beefing about?'

'She's upset.' Randy lifted his hands helplessly. 'Solo and Harry had a friendly scrap. You know Solo. It got a little rough and Nina didn't like it.'

Manuel hesitated, then shrugged.

'We don't like trouble here,' he said to Harry. 'If you're going to work here, watch it.'

'If you don't like trouble, talk to Mr. Dominico,' Harry said quietly. 'He seems to like it.'

Manuel's eyes sparked and his mouth tightened. He hesitated, then looking at Randy, he said, 'I'll want you in the bar in half an hour. There's work to do.' He eyed Harry again, then went back into the restaurant.

'Maybe I'd better clear off,' Harry said. 'I don't want to make it tricky for you.'

'Forget it,' Randy said. 'Solo hired you. He's satisfied. If he wants you to go, he'll tell you. Come on: I'll show you your pad.'

Harry shrugged, picked up his rucksack and followed Randy along a cement path, around the back of the restaurant and finally to four wood cabins, screened from the restaurant by shrubs.

Randy pushed open the door of the second cabin.

'This is yours.' He stood aside. 'Mine's next door. Manuel has the one the other side of yours. The other is empty.'

Harry entered the cabin. It was stiflingly hot in the small boxlike room which was furnished with a truckle bed, an upright chair, a closet and a chest of drawers. Behind a plastic curtain was a shower and a toilet.

He dumped his rucksack on the floor, crossed the room to throw open the window, then moved out to join Randy who had left his guitar and duffel bag in his cabin and was waiting for him by the door.

'Okay?'

'Not a Hilton, but it will do,' Harry said. He lit a cigarette and regarded Randy, then went on quietly, 'Go ahead and say it. According to you, I shouldn't have hit the old man . . . right?'

Randy didn't meet Harry's eyes.

'You hurt his pride. Solo imagines he is the best man in the district. He's never been taken.' Randy thrust his hands deep into his pockets. 'Hell! You certainly socked him.'

'He had it coming. You can't go throwing punches the way he did without having to pay the check sooner or later. It was only because he is fat and a lot older than I am that I held off the first and second times. I hit him just hard enough to warn him, but he thought he could take me and he couldn't resist trying.' He stared at Randy, his eyes cold and pale. 'I've just come out of the jungle where dog eats dog. It's hard to have patience with the phonies, the hippies, the freaks, the junkies and the soft livers who are cluttering up this country. If they leave me alone, I'll go along with them, but if they start leaning on me, it's just too bad for them.'

'Sure.' Randy forced a grin. 'The trouble is people don't expect it from you. Maybe you should hang a danger label on yourself.'

Harry suddenly relaxed. He grinned.

'Maybe I should,' he said.

* * *

A little after 10.00 hours, Harry saw Solo Dominico return from marketing. He watched two Negro waiters run across the sand to carry in the various boxes and baskets that half-filled the estate car.

Harry was sitting in the shade of a palm tree, a dozen yards or so from his cabin. He had been there for the past two hours, keeping out of the way and waiting for Solo to return. During the wait, his mind had been busy. He was far more concerned with the puzzle of the dead man than he was with Dominico or his fiery tempered daughter.

After they had buried the body, he and Randy had driven to the outskirts of Miami where they came on a caravan site. There was a free parking sign above the entrance and already there were some two hundred caravans on the site. Harry had decided this would be the best and safest place to lose the caravan.

At that time in the morning there was no one around. They had unhitched the caravan and had left it in a row with other caravans without being seen.

Beyond Miami, they had found a vast parking lot crowded with cars and this too seemed an ideal place in which to lose the Mustang. Before leaving the car, Harry had gone over it with a damp leather, making absolutely sure that the car, inside and out, was free of their fingerprints.

Reluctantly leaving the Mustang, they had walked to the highway and had picked up a bus that had brought them to the Dominico Restaurant.

Thinking back on each move he had made, Harry was now satisfied that he had taken every precaution to cover their tracks. So long as the body wasn't discovered, he reasoned, there would be no pressure. The chances of the Mustang being found for some weeks in that vast parking lot were remote, and even if it were found it would still not start a murder hunt.

Harry slid his hand into his trousers pocket and fingered the key he had found attached to the inside of the dead man's wig. He hadn't told Randy about this discovery and he was still undecided whether to tell him or not.

He felt that because of its ingenious hiding place whoever had tortured the dead man so savagely had been desperately trying to find it. Remembering the charred, blackened foot, Harry decided that no one would have inflicted such an injury unless the key unlocked some vital and important secret.

He had asked Randy where the City's airport was situated.

Randy had told him it was some fifteen miles to the east of the City and Harry calculated it would be a little over twenty miles from here.

He wondered how soon he could get to the airport; whether there was a bus that would take him there or whether he could borrow Solo's car. He decided he would have to wait a day or so, but he mustn't wait until the restaurant became so busy, he wouldn't be able to beg time off.

He thought it was curious that Randy had so easily shrugged off the finding of the dead man once he was convinced they had covered their tracks. He was now no longer interested in the mysterious woman who had landed them with the Mustang and the caravan nor

interested in the white Mercedes and the driver who Harry was sure had picked the woman up. If Randy wasn't interested, Harry was.

But until he could get to the left luggage locker and find out what it contained, he decided it was a waste of time to think further on the puzzle. His mind now shifted to the present situation.

He watched Solo walk heavy-footed to the restaurant and as he mounted the steps to the veranda, Nina appeared.

Even from this distance, Harry could see she was still furiously angry. She began talking excitedly to Solo who stood over her, frowning and listening.

Harry could hear her shrill tone, but not what she said. Every now and then, she waved towards where the cabins were and Harry knew she was complaining about him.

He wondered if she had enough influence over her father to get him thrown out.

In spite of her hostility, this girl had made a big impact on him and this bothered him. Up to now and since losing Nhan, his relations with girls were impersonal and reserved. He took those who offered themselves, and a number of them did, and forgot them immediately but he knew there could be complications if either this girl or he or both of them ever allowed the situation to get out of hand.

The last thing, he told himself he wanted was another problem and yet there was this thing about her that set him on fire. It could be, he thought uneasily, he was heading for yet another problem and it might even be worth it.

He saw Solo suddenly raise his hand, stopping Nina's vehement gestures. Solo spoke for a few moments as he wagged his thick finger at her, then Nina shrugged, turned and flounced out of sight.

Solo stood on the veranda, his face thoughtful, then he looked towards where Harry was sitting and beckoned. Harry got to his feet and walked across the sand as Solo came down the steps and moved to meet him.

Solo grinned as Harry joined him.

'You had a little spat with my daughter, hey?'

'I wouldn't say that,' Harry returned, his face expressionless, 'but she did have a little spat with me.'

Solo laughed: a deep bass rumble.

'She's a lovely girl and I spoil her.' He shook his head, his eyes sentimental. 'She takes after her dead mother, and there was a fine woman! Harry, be careful. My little girl doesn't like you. I told her you are a fine man and you're going to stay, but watch out.' He dug his finger into Harry's chest. 'I'll tell you something, Harry. She thinks a lot of me: always has done. She can't believe I'm getting old and

when you took me it broke a little dream.' Solo grimaced. 'You understand what I'm saying? Do you remember Dempsey? I worshipped him when I was a young man. I saw all his fights. When Tunney took him, it did something to me . . . broke a dream.' He snorted through his broad nostrils. 'No one should think too much of anyone, but then she's young.' He looked directly at Harry. 'You understand, hey?'

'Yes, I understand, Mr. Dominico,' Harry said. He hesitated, then went on, 'Maybe I'd better clear out. I don't want to upset your daughter by staying here. There are plenty of other jobs in this City.'

'Never let a woman scare you, Harry,' Solo said.

'It's not that.' Harry screwed up his eyes as he looked up at the brilliant blue sky. 'The trouble is I've lived too long in a jungle where men are nervy, mean and likely to explode for no reason at all. They have had death sitting at their elbows so long, they can't help turning mean. Coming back to this country makes me a little impatient with those who have no good reason to act mean. So if it's all the same to you, I'll move on and no hard feelings. Okay?'

'Not okay. I want you to stay. I'm asking you to stay. We two have lots to talk about and you're going to help me. If you have any trouble with Nina, you tell me. I'll stop it. She's a lovely girl, but she has her mother's temper. I'm asking you to stay.'

Harry hesitated.

'Okay, Mr. Dominico. I'll stay.'

Solo grinned and patted Harry's shoulder.

'And stop calling me mister. That I don't like. You call me Solo like everyone around here does I have to start lunch. We won't get many here today, but we have to be ready. You want to be useful?'

'That's what I'm here for.'

'Then take a look at the gear in that hut over there. I'll send a couple of boys to help you. I want to get the rafts floating and the pedal boats ready. You are in charge of the beach now, Harry. I want it kept nice and clean and the mattresses and the umbrellas all good. You can handle that?'

'Sure.'

'You come to the kitchen at twelve, hey? That's when we eat.' Solo patted Harry's shoulder again. 'And don't worry about Nina. If she bothers you, you tell me and I smack her bottom, hey?'

Harry nodded, but he didn't smile. He wasn't in a smiling mood. He had an instinctive feeling that he was making a mistake by staying and yet so great was her attraction, he was glad

Solo had persuaded him to stay.

He worked with two coloured boys for the next two hours. By then twenty pedal boats had been lined up on the sand and inspected.

Harry gave orders for thirteen of them to be repaired and while the boys went off to get the paint and brushes, he looked at his watch and saw it was ten after noon.

He went to his cabin, took a quick shower, put on a clean shirt, then walked over to the restaurant and found his way around the back to the big, airy kitchen.

Solo, Nina, Randy and Manuel were already eating.

‘Come on; come on,’ Solo said, waving to a chair beside him. ‘You don’t have to work so hard. Sit down and eat before it’s all gone. You know Nina, my daughter.’

Nina didn’t look up. She was shelling a king size prawn. For all her reaction, Harry might not have been there.

Solo winked at him, introduced him to Manuel who gave him a curt nod and then pushed the dish of prawns over to him.

‘Help yourself, Harry. I see you’ve got the pedal boats out. How are they?’

Harry told him. He was sitting opposite Nina and he couldn’t keep his eyes from straying to her, but she didn’t look up, and after eating two more prawns, she pushed back her chair and got up.

‘See you, Dad,’ she said and left the kitchen.

Harry tried to conceal a frown, but failed.

‘Don’t mind her,’ Solo said, seeing the frown. ‘She never spends long over lunch. I’ve got a heavy day at the market tomorrow. You want to come, Harry? Half-past five too early for you?’

‘Sure, I’ll come.’

Randy had made up a long list of liquor he wanted for the bar and while he discussed it with Solo, Harry finished his lunch.

Manuel left as Harry was eating apple pie. He didn’t attempt to conceal his hostility, but Harry ignored him. He was the least of Harry’s problems.

Randy went back to the bar, leaving Solo and Harry together.

Solo poured white wine into Harry’s glass.

‘I won’t have time to talk about my son until we go to market,’ he said. ‘I want to hear all about what it’s like out there. Sam is a fine boy. I miss him. He would have been a big help here, but he was drafted and he had to go.’

Harry drank the wine.

‘Yes.’ He stood up. ‘Well, he isn’t the only one.’

‘That’s right.’ Solo heaved a sigh. ‘It’s a bad thing. All that senseless killing.’ He shook his head and pushed back his chair. ‘Dinner’s at seven. If you want anything: a drink, coffee, anything come here and ask for it. Joe will take care of you.’ He nodded to a big, smiling negro who was filling saltcellars at a bench nearby.

‘I might want to take a look at the City one of these nights,’ Harry

said casually. 'What's the transport like? Can I get a bus?'

'Sure: buses run every half hour: the last bus back is two o'clock.'

'I wouldn't be as late as that.' Harry noted Solo wasn't offering his car. 'Well, I'll get along.'

He spent the rest of the afternoon and evening on the beach.

There was a lot of work to do, and he was soon on easy terms with the two coloured boys whose names were Charlie and Mike. Between the three of them, they painted the pedal boats, oiled the mechanism and set up umbrella socks which was heavy work and made Harry sweat, but he enjoyed it all.

Just before 19.00 hours, he went for a swim, towing out one of the rafts. He spent ten minutes doing some fancy diving and he wished there was a high dive board so he could extend himself.

He decided he would talk to Solo about this. It could be an attraction.

He dried off, put on his shirt and slacks and went around to the kitchen. Although he was only five minutes late, Nina had already finished and was leaving the table as he came in. She went past him without looking at him. Manuel too had finished and was heading back to the restaurant.

Solo was at the big stove preparing a sauce. He was wearing a white coverall and a chef's hat and he looked very professional.

There was, he told Harry, a party of eight in for an early dinner.

Joe put a thick steak with french fries down in front of Harry, giving him a wide grin of welcome.

'You want beer, boss?'

'Lots of it, please.' To Solo, Harry asked, 'Randy not eating?'

'He eats in the bar nights.' Solo sniffed at the sauce and nodded approvingly. 'Had a good day, hey? Lots of sun and air?'

'Fine.' Harry went on to talk about the high dive board.

As Solo continued to stir the sauce, he listened attentively.

'Could you fix it, Harry?'

'Sure. I found the right place. Coral foundation and lots of sea. We would want timber, some coconut matting, some steel rails, some cement and we're in business. If you like the idea I could give exhibitions at night. With a few spotlights, we could give the customers a show.'

Solo tasted the sauce, grunted his satisfaction, then gestured to Joe to serve the dish. He came over and sat down beside Harry.

'What do you mean . . . exhibition?'

'Fancy, trick diving. I'm out of practice, but it'll come back.'

Solo beamed.

'That's a great idea. Okay, Harry. You come into market with me tomorrow. When I'm through, I'll drop you off at Hammerson's timber

yard. You tell him what you want and he'll send it out Then you get the bus back, hey?'

'Okay.'

After dinner, Harry, equipped with sheets of paper, a ruler and pencil, went back to his cabin. He made a rough sketch of the diving board. By the time he had figured out how much timber he would need and finished a neat sketch, it was close on 22.00 hours.

He decided to have one more swim before turning in. In the warm, still water, he had a good view of the lighted restaurant. There were about a dozen people dining and four or five in the bar. He could see Randy in a white coat, busy mixing drinks. Manuel, very dressy with his red sash, was moving from table to table, showing his teeth, pouring wine and snapping his fingers at the waiters.

But Harry scarcely looked either at Randy or Manuel. He was looking for Nina. Then he saw her. She was wearing a white pyjama suit with a gold link chain around her slim waist. Her black glossy hair hung loose and the brilliants in her earrings flashed in the lamplight when she moved her head, tossing back her hair.

She was standing on the veranda and looking in his direction, but he doubted if she could see him. He watched her until she abruptly turned away and entered the bar where she began talking to a man in a white tuxedo, a drink in his hand.

Harry drew in a long, deep breath, then swam swiftly and silently to the shore.

* * *

Solo Dominico made his last purchase as the clock in the market tower struck ten.

'Okay . . . that's it,' he said as Harry hoisted a heavy carton of selected cheeses onto his shoulder. 'We go now and have coffee. Then I drop you off at Hammerson's for the timber.'

Harry nodded and made his way through the crowd of restaurant and hotel buyers who were still surrounding the cheese stalls. He put the carton into the estate car, closed and locked the door. Then he joined Solo who led him down a side street to a cafe-bar.

The big room was crowded. Everyone appeared to know Solo and he spent some minutes pausing at tables, introducing Harry, grinning widely and making jokes. Finally, they reached the counter and Solo ordered two mugs of coffee.

'Try some of these,' he said, pushing a bowl loaded with dark, crisp looking sausages. 'Speciality of the house: pork soaked in rum. Very good after a morning's work.' He eyed Harry. 'You enjoyed the work, hey?'

Harry nodded. He had enjoyed working with Solo. During the fifteen-mile drive out, he had talked about Vietnam, answering Solo's many questions. When they had reached the market, he had watched and listened to Solo's buying technique and quickly realised Solo knew his business just that shade better than the seller did.

They were eating their third sausage apiece and Harry was explaining to Solo the kind of terrain he had fought over when a tall, wiry looking man with a suntanned, lined face and clear ice blue eyes came up to the counter.

'Hi, Solo, how are they hanging?' he demanded, offering his hand. Solo beamed and shook hands.

'What are you doing here, Mr. Lepski? You won't find bad men in this market.'

'Who are you kidding? You know as well as I do they're all chisellers and would cut their mothers' throats for a dime.' The cold eyes swept over Harry with a probing stare that told Harry this was a police officer, 'Harry, meet Detective Tom Lepski of the City squad: very smart boy,' Solo said. 'Mr. Lepski, this is Harry Mitchell, my new lifeguard.'

'Is that right?' Lepski regarded Harry. 'Can you swim? The last punk Solo hired as a lifeguard couldn't even paddle.'

'You'll be safe with me,' Harry said quietly. 'I'll rescue, you if you need rescuing.'

Solo laughed, slapping his great thigh.

'Very good! Sure, Mr. Lepski you come out one day and have a little fun at my place: all free . . . nothing but the best. You swim. Harry will rescue you, hey?'

Lepski gave a wintry smile.

'I might at that.' He picked up a sausage and began to nibble it. 'When did you last see Baldy Riccard, Solo?'

Solo's little eyes opened wide.

'Riccard? I haven't seen him in years. You interested in Baldy, Mr. Lepski?'

'I had it that Baldy was here on Tuesday and he called on you, Solo.'

Solo shook his head emphatically.

'A mistake Mr. Lepski. It must be two years since I last saw Riccard.'

Lepski stared thoughtfully at Solo, grimaced, then shrugged.

'Well, okay. If you say so. Baldy was here for three days. So he didn't come to see you? Why didn't he?'

'How should I know?' Solo looked blank. 'Riccard and me were never close. Why should he even know I am in Paradise City?'

'I heard it different. I heard you and he were very close. Since

every hood in the country knows where to find you, why shouldn't Baldy?'

'You're too clever for me, Mr. Lepski,' Solo said, shaking his head. 'It's true Baldy and I were a little friendly one time, but I haven't seen him now for more than two years.'

Lepski again shrugged.

'Okay, okay. Can you tell me anything new you've heard about him since you last saw him?'

Solo reached for another sausage.

'Well, Mr. Lepski, I do hear things from time to time. As you know the boys call on me to do little jobs, but I always say no. I don't need little jobs anymore.' He dipped the sausage into a bowl of chili sauce on the counter. 'I do hear things. I did hear Riccard had pulled a big job in Vero Beach. No details. I didn't want to hear. I'm not interested anymore.'

'You kidding? Vero Beach?' Lepski stared at him. 'What sort of job?'

'I don't know. Frankly, Mr. Lepski, I didn't believe it. There is nothing big in Vero Beach.'

'Except it is a good place for a smuggling run,' Lepski said.

'Of course, there's that, but Baldy was a peterman. He wasn't a smuggler when I knew him.'

'That doesn't mean he hasn't turned smuggler. When was he supposed to have pulled this job?'

'Two months ago so I heard.'

Harry was listening to all this with growing interest. He half turned so his back was to Lepski and he occupied himself with another sausage.

'Look, Solo, I want help,' Lepski said. 'This could be my break. If I don't get a promotion soon my wife threatens to cut off my food. There's a rumour going around that Riccard has been knocked off. I know he's vanished. He was in this City on Tuesday. One of my boys recognised him as he left the airport. I've got a bunch of meatheads working under me and this meathead didn't report that Riccard had arrived. He let him drive off in a taxi without following him or even alerting headquarters. When a punk like Riccard hits this City, a red light goes up or it should go up, but I didn't know anything about it until my meathead started shooting the breeze the next day and mentioned Riccard was in town. I took a long chance and checked all the hire car agencies. Riccard would have to have a car and as he arrived without one, I guessed he'd hire one. Hertz of Vero Beach report that a man answering to Riccard's description hired a Mustang in the name of Joel Blach of Cleveland. We checked Cleveland: no Joel Blach at the address given. So I took a photo of Baldy over to Hertz

and they positively identified him as Blach. Now Riccard and the Mustang have vanished.'

Solo looked sad.

'I'm sorry, Mr. Lepski, but I can't help you. I know nothing about Riccard since two years ago except what I've told you. He didn't come to see me. I've told what I've heard . . . that's all. Very sorry.'

Lepski stared fixedly into Solo's blank eyes.

'Okay, but watch it, Solo. You've kept your nose clean for five years. Keep it that way.' He shouldered his way through the crowd at the bar and made his way out into the sunlit street.

Solo finished his coffee. He looked blandly at Harry. 'We go, hey?'

They left the saloon and made their way to the estate car.

Solo slid his great bulk under the driving wheel, started the engine and edged the car out of the parking lot.

When they were on the highway, Solo said, 'That Lepski is a very ambitious cop: smart, but very ambitious. I don't help him much. Randy told you about me, hey?'

'Yes, he mentioned something,' Harry said cautiously.

'A reformed peterman . . . that's what he told you, hey?'

'That's it.'

Solo grinned.

'And that's correct. It suits me to live the way I do. The cops watch me all the time. Maybe I could do a job that would let me retire, but I don't want to retire nor do I want to spend the rest of my life in a cell. I talk to you because you are like my son. For me, it is a very bad thing that my son is in the Army. Nina is a very lovely girl, but girls don't understand. Sam did.'

'Understand . . . what?' Harry asked.

'Ambition. Girls don't understand that an ambitious man has an urge to prove himself: like the urge you get when you look at a pretty woman. Okay, there are times when I get the urge again. When some stupid hunkhead comes to me with a beautiful proposition, but no idea how to handle it. Sometimes, I'm very tempted, Harry, but I think of my business and Nina. If anything happened to me she wouldn't be able to run my business, then what would happen to her?'

'Yeah.' Harry paused, then asked, 'Who is Baldy Riccard?'

'The second best peterman in the business. I'm the first.' Solo punched himself on his chest. 'He and I once worked together. That was when I was caught. It taught me a lesson, Harry. Never work with anyone: never trust anyone if the deal is illegal. Baldy's getting too old for the racket now. It's time he retired like me. I wouldn't trust his judgment and that's very important.'

'Did he want you to do a job?' Harry made his voice casual and he stared through the windshield, his expression indifferent.

‘No, not a job. He was very mysterious, very excited. He . . .’ Solo paused abruptly and looked sharply at Harry. ‘I’m talking too much. Why do you ask?’

‘You told me you don’t help Lepski much. From that, I guessed Baldy did come to see you on Tuesday last.’

Solo grinned a little sheepishly.

‘Very smart: you would make a good cop, Harry. Yes, you’re right, but it wouldn’t do to tell Lepski. Yes, he came. He wanted to borrow my boat.’ Solo grimaced. ‘Go hire a boat if you want one, I told him, but you don’t have mine. I had to save a lot of money to buy that boat. I told him, go hire one for yourself. But he said he hadn’t any money and he would pay me five grand at the end of the month if I’d let him have the boat that night. I laughed at him. Five grand! Did he think I was crazy? Besides, he was scared. He was so jumpy he was like a flea on a hot plate. Why should I lend him my boat when he was like that? He would hole her or capsize her.’ Solo stroked his thick moustache. ‘Now he’s vanished. Maybe if I had let him have my boat that too would have vanished.’ He put his heavy hand on Harry’s knee. ‘You keep quiet about this, hey?’

‘Sure,’ Harry said.

They drove a mile or so in silence, then Solo said as if speaking his thoughts aloud, ‘I think Baldy’s dead. I think someone bad was after him. You don’t often smell fear on a man, but I smelt it on Baldy.’

Harry thought of the charred, blackened foot and the terror in the dead eyes. He shifted uneasily.

‘Baldy was a funny guy: very vain,’ Solo went on. ‘He spent lots of good money on wigs. He hated being called Baldy. They nearly drove him out of his mind when he was serving his stretch . . . we were in the same jail together. Even the Warden called him Baldy.’ Solo shook his head. ‘I was sorry for him in spite of his stupidity. When we were working on the peter, he took a glove off to put his wig straight and he left a fingerprint. That’s how we got caught . . . his wig!’ Solo’s great belly shook a little as he laughed. ‘Imagine!’ He eased up on the gas pedal, slowing the car. ‘Here we are . . . Hammerson’s: very good friend of mine. I’ll leave you here. You order all the timber you want. Hammerson will tell you where you get the rest of the stuff. I like this high dive idea, Harry . . . very smart.’

He pulled up and Harry got out of the car.

‘There’s a bus passing in half an hour,’ Solo said through the open car window. ‘Get you back in time for lunch. And Harry, no more talk about Baldy, hey? You never know. The cops are always watching. You be careful if you run into Lepski: very smart, very ambitious. We say nothing more, hey?’

Harry watched the estate car speed away, then his expression thoughtful, he walked into the big timber yard.

Chapter Four

It was siesta time.

On the beach, in front of the Dominico Restaurant, there were some thirty men and women lying under sun umbrellas, sleeping off their lunch. They were all shapes and sizes: all as skimpily dressed as decency would allow.

A silence hung over the restaurant which an hour ago had been a hive of activity. Somewhere at the back of the restaurant a faint rumbling sound announced that Solo Dominico was sleeping. The mid-afternoon sun blazed down on the sand and the sea and a soft, hot wind dried the oil and sweat of the sunbathing addicts.

Harry sat in the shade of a spider orchid tree, scooping up hot sand and letting it run through his fingers as he talked. Beside him, Randy lay on his back, his eyes hidden behind sun goggles, listening.

Harry had thought over what Lepski had said and what Solo had told him about Baldy Riccard. After some hesitation, he decided that Randy should be told. Harry came to this decision because he and Randy faced the risk of having Baldy's murder pinned on them. Randy had to be told.

'Well, that's it,' he concluded. 'Whoever killed him was after this key and they didn't get it. I've got it.'

'Throw it away,' Randy said without hesitation. 'This is something that happened. We're in the clear now: let's stay that way.'

'It's not that easy.' Harry clasped his knees as he sat forward. 'The body was planted on us. If it is ever found, there will be a murder hunt. Right now, the police think he's been knocked off. They don't know, of course, but they suspect it, so they are already alert. Lepski is a smart cop. If he finds the Mustang, he'll start digging and he could come up with us. We are not in the clear. I want to find out what is in this left luggage locker.'

'I still say throw the key away.'

'The rumour goes that Baldy pulled a big job,' Harry went on, ignoring Randy's interruption. 'He was a top class safe breaker. The picture I get of all this is he was hired to open a safe. When he got his hands on the contents, he did a double cross and hid the take in this left luggage locker. The people he was working for caught up with him and put pressure on him to talk. He didn't, and while under pressure, he died. There could be a whale of a lot of money in that locker, Randy. If it's there, we cash in.'

Randy sat up abruptly. He looked questioningly at Harry.

'I don't get it. What do you mean?'

Harry continued to stare across the hot white sand.

'All the police know is that Baldy is said to have pulled a big job. They don't know what the job was. If it had been any legitimate steal it would have been reported. Baldy's job hasn't been reported so that must mean it is illegal money: a hijack if you like: money or something valuable owned by criminals so they can't go to the police and complain. That kind of money is anyone's money.'

Randy was tense with interest now.

'You mean if we find money in the locker we can grab it?'

'I don't see why not . . . findings keeping.' He looked at Randy. 'You still want me to throw away the key?'

'Not if it's worth money. You really think there's money in the locker?'

'I don't know, but I do know there's something valuable in there. It would have to be a great deal of money for me, personally, to let someone burn my foot the way Baldy's foot was burned and not turn the key in. So if it isn't money, it's something worth a lot of money.'

'That's right.' Randy dug his fingers into the sand. His thin face was puzzled. 'Harry, I don't dig you. You didn't have to tell me all this. You didn't have to tell me you found the key. You could have opened the locker, taken the money or whatever it is in the locker and said nothing to me about it. Why are you cutting me in?'

Harry studied him.

'If the police ever get on to us, we could land up in the chair. It seemed to me that as we are both in the same jam, we should also split what we get out of it.'

Randy shook his head in wonderment.

'You're an odd ball, Harry . . . but thanks.' He thought for a moment, then his face brightened. 'Gee! Do you really think we're going to be rich, Harry?'

Harry shrugged.

'Don't bet on it.' His eyes became suddenly alert as he saw Nina come out of the restaurant. She was wearing a red bikini and carrying a towel. Harry's heart gave a little jolt as he watched her run across the sand. The movement of her breasts and the roll of her hips sent a savage stab of desire through him.

'Eyes off, Harry,' Randy said quietly, watching him. 'I told you: she's for nobody, unless you want to tangle with Solo.'

Harry got to his feet. He turned his back on Nina as she ran into the sea.

'Tell him I've borrowed the Buick,' he said. 'I'm ordering the rails for the high dive.'

'Is it anywhere near the airport?' Randy asked.

'Not all that far.'

‘I dig . . . I’ll tell him.’

Harry returned to his cabin, changed into a short-sleeved shirt and slacks, then walked to the car park. As he was getting into the estate car, he paused.

Standing in the opposite row under the palm-thatched roof of the car park was a white Mercedes SL 180. Not a car that is seen every day, Harry thought, and he hesitated. His mind went to the white Mercedes which he was now sure had picked up the woman who had been driving the Mustang. A coincidence? More than likely, but the Army had trained him too well now to accept nothing but facts.

He looked up and down the long double row of cars and saw no one, then he crossed to the Mercedes. The windows were down and he had no trouble leaning in to examine the licence tag. It was made out to: Emmanuel Carlos, 1279 Pine Tree Boulevard, Paradise City.

This told him nothing. He stepped away from the car, again looked to right and left, again hesitated. The sight of the car alerted and disturbed him. Of course, he told himself, there must be a number of white Mercedes SL 180 in the district, but his mind refused to dismiss the car.

He walked rapidly down the long shaded aisle and into the barroom.

Joe was washing glasses and humming to himself. His black shining face lit up when he saw Harry.

‘Want a drink, boss?’ he asked.

‘I’ll have a Coke, thank you.’ Harry sat on a stool, leaning his elbows on the counter. The bar was deserted. Through the big windows, he could see the beach and the bodies under the sun umbrellas.

Joe poured the Coke, added ice and pushed the glass towards Harry.

‘Would you know Mr. Emmanuel Carlos?’ Harry asked after taking a long drink.

‘Mr. Carlos? Sure, boss.’ Joe rolled his eyes. ‘One of our best customers. He comes here regularly three, four times a week. Lots of money: he’s a very important gentleman. He’s out there now with Mrs. Carlos.’

Harry’s suspicions began to subside.

‘What’s he do, Joe?’

‘Do?’ Joe looked blank. ‘I don’t reckon he does anything. His father left him a whale of a lot of money.’

‘What did his father do?’

Joe took a box of cigars from under the counter and laid it before Harry.

‘That’s his father. Carlos Havana Cigars.’

Harry stared at the ornate label on the box and examined the coloured photograph of the bearded man in a frock coat.

‘I thought we had given up importing Havana cigars, Joe.’

‘That’s right. This is now under the counter stuff. Mr. Dominico has a big stock. We sell only to the customers we know.’

‘You say Mr. Carlos is here now?’

‘Sure. He came in here only a few minutes ago to use the phone. He’s out there now with Mrs. Carlos . . . the fourth umbrella to the right.’

Harry went to the window and looked out onto the beach.

He could see a man and a woman lying under an umbrella. The man, heavily built, was in swim trunks, lying on his side, his back to Harry. The woman, wearing a sharkskin white bathing suit, lay on her back. Most of her face was concealed by enormous sun goggles. Her hair was brick red and her skin was tanned to a nut brown, even shade. She had small thrusting breasts and a flat stomach which was more than the other women had who lay around her.

Harry studied them for a long moment, then shrugged.

‘See you, Joe,’ he said and left the bar.

By the time he had placed an order for the chromium handrails for the high dive board, it was 16.00 hours. He hurried to the estate car and headed for the airport. He had trouble in finding parking space. Finally leaving the car, he entered the bustling reception lobby. It took him some minutes to locate the left luggage locker section, then he walked down the long alley, looking for locker No. 388.

When he found it, he paused to look right and left. A fat, middle-aged woman, some way down the alley was struggling to get a bag out of a locker. Coming down the alley was a thickset man in a creased lightweight suit. He carried a grip and was looking impatiently for a vacant locker. Neither of these people alerted Harry’s suspicions. He took the key from his pocket, sank it into the lock and opened the locker door.

Lying on the floor of the locker was a white plastic, much travelled sui case, showing cuts and scars. Painted along its side was a broad red band: the kind of band people put on their cases for quick and easy identification.

Harry pulled the suitcase out of the locker and lowered it to the ground. Its weight was disappointing: it was no heavier than any average suitcase packed for a long weekend. It told Harry that there was no great fortune of money inside.

Leaving the key in the lock, he shut the locker door, then picking up the suitcase, he walked, without hurrying, towards the reception lobby.

Swarms of travellers swirled and eddied around him. A girl’s

strident voice broke through the chatter and the sound of shuffling feet to announce the departure of Flight 507 for New York. Children, laughing, screaming and frazzling, added to the pandemonium of departure.

Harry kept on, avoiding people, side stepping children, intent on getting back to his cabin to examine the suitcase.

‘Hey you!’

There was a snap of authority in the voice that was like a blow.

Harry looked to his left, still moving, but when he saw Detective Lepski signalling to him, he stopped abruptly.

The suitcase he was carrying suddenly seemed to him to be red hot. He waited, watching Lepski push his way unceremoniously through the crowd.

Lepski planted himself in front of Harry: his ice blue eyes probing.

‘Remember me?’ he demanded in a tough cop voice.

Harry met the stare without flinching.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Detective Lepski . . . the officer who wondered if I could swim.’

‘That’s me.’ Lepski paused, a little thrown out of his stride by Harry’s apparent unconcern. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘If it’s any of your business, I’m collecting my bag,’ Harry said.

‘That your bag?’ Lepski stared at the white plastic suitcase in Harry’s hand, scowling at it.

‘Sure. I left it here last night. Now I’m working for Solo I need my things. Any other questions?’

Lepski bristled ‘Don’t get smart Mitchell! I don’t like smart guys in this City.’

‘You don’t? Who do you like? Dummies?’

Lepski’s tanned face darkened.

‘I said don’t get smart! Where are you from?’

Harry took from his shirt pocket the plastic folder containing his papers and offered them ‘If you’re that curious, Mr. Lepski, go ahead and have yourself a ball.’

Lepski took the papers, read, taking his time, then he carefully folded the papers, returned them to their plastic cover and handed it back.

‘Paratrooper, huh?’ He regarded Harry now with a respectful expression ‘Okay, Sergeant, excuse me. You’re welcome here. We get a lot of bums through this City. It’s one of my jobs to put a rocket under their tails. No hard feelings?’ and he offered his hand.

Harry shook hands.

‘No hard feelings.’

‘You staying long, Sergeant?’

‘A couple of months. I have a job waiting for me in New York. I

came here for some sun and air.'

'You've come to the right place.' Lepski scratched the end of his nose, then asked, 'Did Solo tell you Baldy Riccard called on him, Sergeant?'

Harry's face remained expressionless.

'No, Mr. Lepski. He said nothing like that.'

'Didn't he say anything about me after I left him?'

'Oh sure. He said you were a very smart cop and a very ambitious one.'

Lepski looked pleased.

'He's a smart old coot. One of these days I'll come out to his place and bring my wife.'

'He'll be pleased.'

'You think so?' Lepski laughed. 'I wouldn't bet on that. Well so long: happy vacation,' and he walked away, shoving through the crowd to the exit.

Harry drew in a deep breath. He was aware he was sweating.

He crossed the reception lobby, then leaving the airport, he made his way to the car park.

He put the suitcase on the passenger's seat of the car, got in, started the engine and drove the car out of the parking lot.

Because the unexpected meeting with Lepski had shaken him a little, his instincts for trouble were alerted. There had been long hours when he had taken a patrol through the jungle that this instinct had saved him whereas it hadn't saved some of his men who followed him and who had allowed their alertness to become slack. Harry's instinct for danger was highly developed and even now, after three months from the jungle, it still functioned.

As he swung the car around so that it headed for the airport exit, he spotted a dusty green and white Chevrolet back out fast, squeal to a stop, swing around and come after him. In his driving mirror, Harry saw the driver was a squat, dark complexioned man, wearing a panama hat pulled well down to half conceal his features.

At any other time, Harry would have ignored the car, but in his present state of alertness, he wondered about it. He drove to the highway and pulled up at the stop sign, his flasher indicating that he was turning right. On his driving mirror he saw the Chevrolet slowing, its right flasher coming on.

Harry edged his way into the oncoming traffic and drove with the traffic, keeping to the near side. From time to time, he glanced into the driving mirror and saw the Chevrolet was behind him.

Was he imagining the car was following him? He wondered.

The car had so positioned itself behind two other cars, its licence plate was hidden. The car was with him still as he reached the turn off

to the Dominico Restaurant. As he turned, he slowed and watched the Chevrolet go past and saw the driver's head turn to stare at the back of the estate car.

Harry drove into the restaurant's car park, left the estate car and started towards his cabin, carrying the suitcase, as Solo appeared in the kitchen doorway.

Solo was scowling. His heavy, fat face was dark with anger.

'You don't take my car without asking me,' he said, his voice harsh. 'I don't hire you to go rides in my car!'

Harry paused. He regarded Solo, his eyes alert.

'I told Randy to tell you why I took the car,' he said quietly. 'I've been ordering the hand rails for the high dive board.'

Solo snorted angrily.

'I don't take messages. Your job is to look after the beach. If you want hand rails, you tell me!'

Harry walked slowly forward until he was facing Solo. He looked directly into the little, angry eyes.

'Okay, from now on, I'll look after the beach and you take care of the high dive board if you still want it.'

He stared at Solo for a long moment, then turned and started down the sandy path towards his cabin.

'Hey! Harry!'

Harry turned.

'When are those hand rails going to be delivered?'

'In seven days.'

Solo shifted awkwardly. He cleared his throat, then rubbed the back of his neck.

'So you look after it, hey? So you forget what I said, hey?'

Harry walked back until he again faced Solo.

'If you want it that way,' he said. 'It's your business, Solo. You please yourself.'

'So we do it your way.'

'If that's what you want.' Harry hesitated, then went on, 'I told you: I haven't any patience with people who have no reason to act mean. Excuse my impatience.'

Solo grinned sheepishly. He patted Harry on his shoulder.

'You're right. Okay, Harry, take the goddamn car whenever you want it. Forget it, hey?'

'I've forgotten it.' Harry moved a little closer. 'Hit me with that jab of yours . . . there's something wrong about it.'

Solo's eyes opened wide.

'I don't get it.'

'Throw your punch, Solo.'

The punch came and slid along Harry's ribs.

‘Very smart boy,’ Solo said, his eyes showing his disappointment.

‘You have a fine punch, but you’re throwing it wrong,’ Harry said. ‘Your elbow is away from your body. Keep it close like a golf swing. Try again.’

He braced himself as Solo’s fist smashed into his side. He was lifted off his feet and he thudded flat on his back. He lay still, stunned, feeling the jar of the punch go through his body. He had deliberately leaned into the punch knowing this was the only way to make Solo happy.

Solo dropped on his knees and caught hold of Harry’s head.

‘Sweet Maria! Are you all right? I didn’t mean it, Harry. I’m sorry . . .’

Harry shoved the hot, sweating hands from his head and sat up. He put his hand to his aching ribs, then he grinned.

‘That would have sat even Dempsey on his pants,’ he said. ‘You sure have a fine punch, Solo . . . phew I . . .’

‘Are you okay?’ Solo was still worried.

Harry got slowly to his feet and began to dust the sand off his slacks.

‘Sure.’ He rubbed his ribs. ‘You remember to keep your elbow in, and you’re the boss.’

Solo grinned delightedly.

‘I wouldn’t say that. You throw a mean punch too, Harry, but maybe we’re in the same class, hey?’

Harry knew then he would have no further trouble with Solo.

‘Weight counts, Solo. A good big ‘un will always beat a good little ‘un.’ He gave Solo a sharp dig in the ribs. ‘Boss!’

Solo squirmed with delight.

‘Well, maybe. You get on the beach now, hey? I get back to the cooking.’

Harry picked up the suitcase.

‘Be right with it.’

Solo’s eyes went to the white suitcase with its band of red.

‘That your stuff?’

‘Yeah . . . I picked it up now I’m staying.’

‘Sure, you’re staying.’ Solo patted Harry’s shoulder. ‘You fix the high dive board, hey?’

‘I’ll fix it.’

Harry left him and made his way to his cabin. As he pushed open the door, he became aware how flimsy it was. He entered the cabin, stripped off his clothes and put on trunks. He then tried the catches on the suitcase, but found them locked. This wasn’t the time to see what was inside the case. Solo would be expecting him to be on the beach any minute now. He hesitated, then decided the cabin wasn’t the place

in which to leave the case.

He carried the case outside, made sure no one was watching him, then took the case to the back of the cabin where a big pile of deck chairs were stacked. He buried the suitcase under the chairs, smoothed down the sand where his footprints showed, then returned to the cabin. From his rucksack he took a reel of black cotton. He snapped off a length of cotton, left the cabin, closed the door, then fixed the cotton across the bottom of the door so that if someone entered the cabin, the cotton would snap.

Then he walked down to the beach.

He saw Charlie and Mike, the two coloured helps, carrying trays of drinks to the people lounging under the sun umbrellas.

He paused to look at the fourth umbrella under which Carlos and his wife had been lying. The man had gone, but the woman was still there, reading a magazine.

He felt an urge of curiosity to see her at close quarters. He walked over to where she was lying and paused by her.

‘Can I get you a drink, Mrs. Carlos?’ he asked, the woman put down her magazine and looked up at him.

Her big sun goggles partially hid her face, but he saw her nose was short, her mouth small; her lips, carefully painted, were thin. He guessed she would be closer to forty than thirty: a woman who took care of herself with a long history of massage, sauna baths, daily visits to the hairdresser: a contestant in the battle most women make to look younger than they are. He felt the hidden eyes behind the sun goggles quizzing him.

‘No, thank you.’ Her voice carried a faint accent that Harry thought he recognised. He was now almost certain this was the woman who had been driving the Mustang. ‘Who are you?’

‘Harry Mitchell, the new lifeguard around here.’

‘Hello, Harry.’ She smiled. ‘Solo will tell you we - my husband and I - are often here. Can you swim? The last boy Solo hired . . .’ She lifted her hands and laughed.

‘Do you swim, Mrs. Carlos?’

She looked at him.

‘Probably better than you.’

‘Is that right? I’m going in now. Do you bet, Mrs. Carlos?’

She shook her head.

‘Not on a dark horse.’

‘If you’re so good, how about a fifty yard start to that raft and ten dollars to one?’

‘My! My! You must think you are good. Can you afford to lose ten dollars?’

‘That’s my business, isn’t it, Mrs. Carlos?’

‘Excuse me.’ She stared up at him, then shook her head. ‘No. I am good, but now I can see you would be better. I’ll have a gin and tonic instead.’

‘Yes, Mrs. Carlos.’ His tone was curt. That she had thought he couldn’t cover a bet angered him. He turned abruptly and headed for Charlie who had distributed his last drink. Seeing him coming, Charlie ran to him, grinning widely. Harry told him to take Mrs. Carlos a gin and tonic, then he walked away until he reached a pedal boat. He sat on it, his anger still gnawing at him.

Had she recognized him as he had recognized her? He wondered.

She had given no sign that she might have recognized him, but that didn’t mean anything. She was very sophisticated and cool: not a woman to be fazed easily. He frowned down at the sand. Was he mistaken? He thought again of the woman in the Mustang: the same build: the same accent, but, of course, he could be mistaken. What would the wife of a man as wealthy as Carlos be doing with a dead body? It didn’t make sense.

He stroked his nose and looked across the hot sand to where the woman was lying. She had picked up her magazine and was reading again.

Irritated that it was now a problem he couldn’t immediately solve, he shrugged, pushed himself off the pedal boat and walked down to the sea. He stood watching the bathers, thinking of the woman and thinking of the white plastic suitcase.

It wasn’t until just before dinner that Harry was able to return to his cabin. A blonde, plump teenager had come up to him, flushed and giggling, and had asked him for a swimming lesson.

At the end of half an hour, there was another giggling girl waiting.

By their prowess, Harry knew both of them could swim and they were making this an excuse to fool around with him. This was part of the job, and he went through the motions.

There was then a constant demand for drinks and he had to help Charlie and Mike to handle the rush. It wasn’t until 19.00 hrs. when the bathers had gone in for a shower before changing for dinner that he found himself free to go to his cabin.

He paused at the door to check the black cotton and his eyes narrowed as he saw the cotton was snapped. He pushed open the door and entered the stuffy little room. He looked around. Nothing had apparently been disturbed, but he knew someone had been in there.

He stepped cautiously out and looked to right and left, then he went around to the back of the cabin and checked that the suitcase was still under the pile of deck chairs. Satisfied, he took a shower, put on slacks and a shirt and went along to the kitchen for dinner.

He was the only one to sit down at the table. Neither Nina nor Manuel was there and Solo was busy at the stove. Solo grinned cheerfully at him.

‘You go ahead,’ he said. ‘I see you were giving lessons, hey? Nice cuddly girls, hey? Everyone is very pleased, Harry. I’m pleased too.’

Joe produced a plate of Chicken Maryland with fried bananas.

‘You’re trying to make me fat,’ Harry said.

Solo laughed.

‘You need good food . . . a big man like you. You need food like I need food.’ He paused to peer into the oven. ‘Mrs. Carlos was asking about you. She’s very interested in you.’ Solo shut

the oven door and winked at Harry. ‘She’s my best and richest customer.’

Harry cut into the chicken.

‘What did she want to know?’

‘Who you are . . . where you come from . . . how you got here . . .’

Harry regarded the morsel of chicken on his fork.

‘How I got here? What’s that mean?’

Solo began to baste the five chickens turning on the rotor grill.

‘Women ask the goddamnedest questions. She wanted to know if you came by road.’

Harry laid down his fork.

‘So what did you tell her?’

Solo stared at him.

‘I told her you came with Randy on the thumb. Did I say anything wrong?’

Harry shook his head.

‘That’s how we came. Is she staying for dinner?’

‘She never has dinner here. Lunch . . . not dinner. She’s gone home.’

Solo began to cut up the chickens, whistling under his breath.

Harry ate. So she now knew who he was and her question made it certain she was the woman in the Mustang. So what followed?

He finished his meal without enjoying it, then got to his feet.

‘I’m going to the bar. Randy might need a hand.’

‘Sure,’ Solo was scarcely listening. He was arranging with loving care pieces of chicken on a salver, adding fried bananas, cherries and pineapple.

Harry walked past the restaurant. There were some forty people dining. Manuel was darting around the tables. Nina, in a scarlet pyjama suit, was standing at a table talking to four men. They were looking up at her, laughing, their eyes stripping her.

Harry entered the deserted bar. Randy was washing glasses.

He looked at Harry, lifting his eyebrows inquiringly.

Harry quickly told him that he had collected the suitcase, that he had run into Lepski and was now sure that Mrs. Carlos was the woman in the Mustang.

Randy listened, a glass suspended in his hand, his eyes startled.

‘Not Mrs. Carlos . . . that’s crazy!’ he said when Harry paused. ‘I don’t dig for that.’

‘Then why did she ask if we came by road?’ Harry sat on a stool and rested his elbows on the counter. ‘The same build: the same accent. . . and now this question. It’s her all right.’

Randy put down the glass.

‘But she’s stinking rich! What . . . I mean . . . what the hell does it mean?’

Harry lit a cigarette.

‘I don’t know. Maybe we’ll get a clue from the suitcase. When are you free?’

‘Not before 23.30.’

‘Okay. I’ll wait for you.’ Nodding, Harry left the bar. He walked along the path that led past the kitchen and glanced through the open window. Solo was occupied, his back turned. Joe was standing by him, holding a dish. Without stopping Harry continued on towards his cabin. As he approached the shrubbery screening the cabins he became aware of a movement ahead of him. He stopped short, tense, as he peered into the darkness. He was sure that someone ahead of him had moved into the shadows by his cabin. He stepped swiftly and silently off the path and flattened himself against the trunk of a tree. He waited, his eyes searching the shadows.

He heard the scratch of a match and a tiny flame flared up. In the light of the flame he saw Nina’s face, framed by her black, glistening hair. She lit a cigarette, then dropped the match.

Harry hesitated, then stepped back onto the path and walked towards the red, glowing end of her cigarette.

As he came up to her, he smelt the subtle perfume she was wearing. It was too dark to see much of her, but he could just make out her shadowy outline. Again he felt the violent stab of desire go through him: something he had hoped was to torment him no longer.

‘I want to talk to you,’ she said out of the darkness.

‘I’m good at listening.’ His voice was scarcely a murmur. ‘Go ahead . . . talk.’

She dropped the cigarette. It fell on the sand, its glowing tip flared, then died.

‘We can’t talk here.’ He was aware her voice was husky and breathless ‘Come with me . . . give me your hand.’

He felt a sense of sharp disappointment. Her rage and her contempt had been important to him. You cowardly thug. She had

called him that. Calling him that had been at least something different which he had welcomed: something completely different from the sickening love names he had been called by the sex-starved women who had groaned and squirmed under him, their fingernails digging into his back.

He put out his hand. In the darkness, she failed for a moment to find contact, then her dry, burning fingers closed around his wrist. Leading him, she moved off into the darkness. He went without eagerness, but without hesitation. His heart seemed to be beating more slowly and with difficulty as if his blood had thickened.

Finally, they reached a clump of palm trees, surrounded by sand dunes: a narrow channel between the dunes gave them a direct view of the sea which looked like a black mirror as it reflected the moon.

She released his hand and dropped down on her knees: there was now enough light for him to see her distinctly. Her scarlet pyjamas appeared to be black; her skin sharply white by contrast. He stood beside her, looking down at her. Impatiently, she caught hold of his hand and pulled him down so he too was kneeling, facing her.

‘That was the most beautiful thing that has ever happened to me,’ she said fiercely, ‘when you knocked that fat old swine off his feet.’

He felt a tiny explosion of shock inside him. This was the last thing he was expecting to hear from her. He stiffened, resting his clenched fists on his thighs.

‘If you knew the times I had hoped and prayed that some man would do it,’ she went on. ‘If you could know how much I needed proof that he really wasn’t the godhead and wasn’t utterly invincible as he told my mother, told my brother and told me until we began to believe it. I watched you play with him. Three times you let him hit at you. Then . . . ! It was the most beautiful, satisfying thing that has ever happened to me!’

Still he said nothing: still he stared at her.

‘I hate him!’ The passionate vehemence in her voice made him flinch. ‘He is crushing me and ruining my life as he ruined my mother’s life, as he tried to ruin Sam’s life. But Sam had the guts to clear out and join the army. He looks on me as his chattel as he looked on mother as his chattel: a neuter creature who must have no feelings, no thoughts, no ambitions: who must never have a husband nor a lover. If I hadn’t told him I wanted you to go, he would never have let me out of his sight so long as you remain here. But I’ve fooled him! He really believes I hate you because you knocked him down. You are the first real man, after Sam, who has come here. Others have come and gone: too scared even to look at me.’

‘Why are you telling me all this?’ Harry asked.

‘Because you are a man and I want a man,’ she said.

With two rapid movements, she took off her pyjama top and trousers. He could hear her breath rasping against the back of her throat as she leaned forward and began to unbutton his shirt.

He pushed her hands away, hesitating. Then his desire for her, almost as frantic as her own for him, overrode his caution. He stripped off and took her.

She nearly spoilt it for them both by her raging impatience, but he held her firmly, crushing her so she couldn't move, speaking gently to her, his face against hers, telling her to wait, that it must be slow. After a few moments when she reared against him, she seemed to sense that he knew what was best for her and she became relaxed and still. It took him many long minutes before he knew by her quick breathing and by the way she began to arch her back that she was ready for the storm.

He said softly to her, 'Yes . . . now . . . together.'

And then came the great rushing surging waves, the roaring in their ears and the floating into a vacuum that they wanted to go on forever.

* * *

As Randy approached Harry's cabin he saw a light from behind the curtain. He paused before the door and knocked. He heard Harry cross the room, then the door opened.

'Come on in.'

'Keep your voice down,' Randy said softly. 'Manuel's just gone to bed.'

'Then we'll take the case to your cabin.' Harry crossed to the bed and picked up the white plastic suitcase.

'What's inside?'

'I haven't looked yet . . . it's locked. Have you a screwdriver?'

Randy peered at the locks.

'I have a good knife . . . that should do it.'

They moved out into the hot night, walked the few yards down the path and entered Randy's cabin. Randy put on the light, closed and bolted the door.

'What have you been doing all this time?' he asked. 'I thought you were certain to have looked inside by now.'

'I was waiting for you. If there's any money in here, it's not a lot'

Randy opened a drawer in his chest, took out a broad-bladed fishing knife and offered it. It didn't take Harry long to force open the catches of the case. Then he lifted the lid.

Breathing heavily, Randy stood over him, watching.

Carefully, Harry laid the contents of the suitcase out onto the bed.

Then he moved the case off the bed and surveyed the articles from the case laid out now in two neat rows.

There was a grey, shabby lightweight suit, three white shirts, four pairs of black socks, a shabby plastic hold-all containing a cordless razor, tooth brush, sponge, soap and a tube of dentifrice, a pair of blue pyjamas, well-worn heelless slippers and six white handkerchiefs. The second row offered more interest.

There was a 7.67 mm. Luger Automatic pistol with a box of one hundred cartridges, a hundred Chesterfield cigarettes, a half bottle of White Horse whisky, a small roll of \$5 bills and a well-worn black leather wallet.

Harry picked up the roll of bills, slid off the elastic band and counted them.

‘Here’s our fortune, Randy. Two hundred and ten dollars.’

‘Better than nothing.’ Randy couldn’t keep the disappointment out of his voice.

Harry sat on the bed and picked up the wallet. He shook out its contents. There were several visiting cards with names of men that meant nothing to him: an American Express Credit card made out to Thomas Lowery; a \$100 bill and a driving licence made out to William Riccard with a Los Angeles address.

Harry showed the licence to Randy.

‘At least we know for sure the dead man is Baldy Riccard.’

‘Where does that get us?’

Harry was staring at the articles on the bed.

‘There’s not one thing here that would be worth the torture Baldy endured,’ he said, half to himself, ‘and yet I’m willing to bet he was determined to keep this suitcase from changing hands.’ He picked up the empty suitcase, opened it and taking up Randy’s knife, he began slitting open the cloth lining. He discovered, fixed by adhesive tape to the lid, a plastic visiting card holder containing one plain card. He freed the card, turned it over and read the inscription written in small neat handwriting: The Funnel. Sheldon. It. 07.45. May 27.

‘This must be it . . . but what does it mean?’ Harry handed the card to Randy, Randy read it, then shook his head.

‘The only Sheldon I know is the Sheldon Island, ten miles outside the reef in the bay. Couldn’t be that or could it?’

‘What happens there?’

‘Nothing. It’s just rocks and birds. Nina goes out there when she wants to swim bare.’

‘The Funnel mean anything?’

‘Not to me . . . Nina might know. Shall I ask her?’

‘No.’ Harry took the card. He regarded it for a long moment, then shrugged and put the card in his shirt pocket. ‘Let’s get some sleep. It’s

getting late.' He split the roll of \$5 bills and offered half to Randy. 'That's your share.'

'Gee! Thanks! I can use it.' Randy waved to the articles on the bed. 'What are you going to do with this junk?'

'Get rid of it.' Harry began packing the suitcase.

'So that's that . . . no fortune,' Randy said. 'What a letdown I . . .'

'We don't know yet . . . the card could be the clue.' Harry closed the lid of the case and forced the catches back into their slots.

Watching him, seeing the far away expression in the blue eyes. Randy wondered what was going on in his mind.

'See you tomorrow,' Harry said. He picked up the suitcase and let himself out of the cabin.

Chapter Five

The only sound to disturb the silence that hung over the Detectives' room at Paradise City Police Headquarters was the busy tapping of a bluebottle fly as it banged itself against the dirty ceiling.

Detective 3rd Grade Max Jacoby sat at his desk studying Assimil's French Without Toil. He was silently mouthing sentences like: *Le pauvre diable est sourd comme un pot* and *il est malin comme un singe*.

Jacoby, young, tall and dark-complexioned had reached Lesson 114. He now had only 26 more lessons to complete the course. In anticipation of this event, he had saved up enough money to go to Paris for his summer vacation when he was determined to startle the Parisians with his knowledge of their language.

Opposite him, Sergeant Joe Beigler sat at his desk, a carton of lukewarm coffee in his hand, a cigarette drooping from his lips, his eyes half closed while he tried to make up his mind which horse he should back for the 15.00 hr. handicap.

A big, powerfully built man in his late thirties, his fleshy face freckled, Beigler was Captain of Police Frank Terrell's right hand man. This afternoon, for a change, there was no immediate crime in the City. It had been so quiet, Terrell had gone home to mow his lawn leaving Beigler to hold the desk. Beigler was so used to this chore that he wouldn't have known what to do with himself if he was given the afternoon off. So long as he had a constant supply of coffee and cigarettes, he would be content to remain at his desk until he was carried out to his funeral.

'Would you say a monkey is a sly animal, Sarg?' Jacoby asked, having puzzled over his lesson for some time, overlooking the fact that Assimil was hopefully offering him an addition to his vocabulary and not making insinuations against monkeys.

Only half hearing, Beigler lifted his head and squinted at Jacoby through the spiral of smoke from his cigarette.

'What was that again?'

'*Il est malin comme un singe*,' Jacoby read with an excruciating accent. 'Malin . . . sly. Singe . . . monkey. That's what they say here. What do you think?'

Beigler drew in a long, slow breath. His freckled face turned a tomato red.

'Are you calling me a goddamn monkey?' he demanded, leaning forward aggressively.

Jacoby sighed. He should have known he couldn't expect help or

encouragement from Beigler whom he regarded as practically illiterate.

‘Okay, Sarg, forget it. Sorry I spoke.’

The door burst open and Detective 2nd Grade Lepski came into the room like a bullet from a gun. He slid to a standstill before Beigler’s desk.

‘The Chief in, Joe?’ he demanded, his voice loud and breathless.

Beigler sat back and eyed Lepski’s excited face with disapproval.

‘No, he isn’t. If you must know, he’s home cutting his lawn.’

‘Cutting his lawn?’ Lepski looked shocked. ‘You mean he’s using a goddamn power mower for God’s sake?’

‘No. He’s cutting it with a pair of nail scissors,’ Beigler said with heavy sarcasm. ‘That way he gets more suntan.’

‘Look, cut out the jokes.’ Lepski began to hop from one foot to the other. ‘I’m onto something hot. This could be my break, Joe . . . the break I’m waiting for for my promotion. While you punks have been sitting on your fannies, chewing the fat, I’ve found Riccard’s car!’

Beigler leaned forward.

‘Are you calling me a punk, Lepski?’

In spite of his excitement, Lepski realised he had slid onto thin ice. After all, Beigler was the Top Shot at Headquarters when the Chief wasn’t there. A slip like that could delay his promotion.

‘Listen, Sarg, when I talk about punks, I mean the rest of this dim crew like him.’ Lepski pointed to Jacoby. He was on safe ground here. Jacoby was only 3rd Grade. ‘Chiefs and Sergeants are always excluded. I’ve found Riccard’s car!’

Beigler scowled at him.

‘Well, don’t set it to music. Write a report.’

‘If the Chief is at home, I’d better go down and see him,’ Lepski said. He hated writing reports. ‘He’ll want to know about this, Sarg, pronto.’

Beigler decided Young Hopeful at 18 to 1 could be a slight risk but a fair chance and he wrote the name down on his blotter. He looked at the wall clock, saw he had another half hour before laying his bet and switched his mind back to police business.

‘Stop jumping about like you have a stoppage,’ he said. ‘Where did you find the car?’

‘Look, Sarg, we’re wasting time. I’d better talk to the Chief.’

‘I’m the Chief,’ Beigler said in an awful voice. ‘Right now I’m in charge of this goddamn force. Where did you find it?’

‘Look, Sarg, this is important to me . . .’

‘Where did you find it?’ Beigler roared, banging his fists on his desk.

Lepski saw it was hopeless.

'I'll write a report.' He started towards his desk.

'Come back here! You'll write the report later. Where did you find it?'

'It was found in the car park behind Mear's Self-Service Store,' Lepski said reluctantly.

'It was found? Does that mean you didn't find it personally?'

'A patrolman found it,' Lepski said sullenly. 'I had the bright idea of calling Miami . . . so in actual fact I did find it.'

'Go write the report,' Beigler said. He dropped his big freckled hand on the telephone receiver, talked to Miami's police headquarters as Lepski, his face sullen, began hammering away at his typewriter.

Beigler asked questions, grunted, asked more questions, then said, 'Okay, Jack. We'll want the full coverage. I'll get Hess over to you. There's talk around that Baldy has been knocked off . . . Yeah . . . okay,' and he hung up.

He dialled Terrell's home number. There was a little delay before Captain of Police Terrell came to the phone.

'Riccard's car has been found, Chief,' Beigler said.

Lepski stopped typing and pointed frantically to himself, but Beigler ignored him.

'The Miami police are checking it for fingerprints. I'm sending Hess there. Okay, Chief, I'll keep in touch,' and he hung up.

'I didn't hear you mention my name,' Lepski said bitterly.

'I didn't,' Beigler returned. 'Get that report written!' He swung his eyes to where Jacoby was still mouthing sentences.

'Max! Take a car, go to Fred's place, pick him up and take him to Mear's Self-Service Store.'

'Okay, Sarg.' Jacoby put his books away hurriedly and charged out of the room.

'Hess at home cutting his lawn too?' Lepski asked bitterly.

'His boy is sick. He's taken the afternoon off.'

'That two headed little monster? Sick? That's a laugh? That little horror couldn't be sick if he wanted to. It's my bet Hess is snoring his head off in the sun.'

Beigler grinned.

'You could be right . . . get on with that report.'

Ten minutes later, Lepski ripped the sheet out of the typewriter, read through what he had written, signed it with a flourish and laid it on Beigler's desk.

'I've got an idea,' he said. 'Danny O'Brien served five years with Baldy and Dominico. Suppose I go along and twist his arm a little? He might know what Baldy was doing when he was here for three days.'

Beigler read the report, then looked up at Lepski.

'You think Solo is lying?'

‘Of course he’s lying, but he’s too big and smart for us to twist his arm. I’m as sure as I’m standing here Baldy called on him and I want to know why. If anyone can tell me it’s Danny.’

Beigler rubbed his thick nose.

‘Well, okay. Go talk to him.’

Lepski eyed him.

‘If I were a Sergeant and read that report, do you know what I would think?’

‘Sure,’ Beigler said promptly. ‘You’d think it was written by a mental defective who had got to 2nd Grade by nepotism.’

Lepski gaped at him.

‘What was that again . . . nepot . . . what?’

Beigler was a great reader of paperbacks. When he came across a word he didn’t understand - and there were many of them - he looked them up in a dictionary and filed them away in his memory to use to impress. He savoured his triumph now by looking insufferably superior as he repeated, ‘Nepotism . . . favouritism to relatives in bestowing office.’

He was on safe ground here because Lepski’s wife happened to be a second cousin of Carrie, Captain Terrell’s wife. Beigler never ceased to pull Lepski’s leg about this knowing full well that the only difference the relationship made was to make Lepski mad.

‘When I become Chief of Police in this goddamn City,’ Lepski said heatedly, ‘I’ll have you retired. Don’t forget that!’

‘When you become Chief of Police of this City, Lepski, I’ll be the tenth man on the moon! Get the hell out of here and get working!’

Lepski drove to Seacombe, a suburb of Paradise City where the workers lived: a small, shabby colony of bungalows and tenement buildings, which spoilt the approach to the opulent, flower-laden millionaire’s playground.

Danny O’Brien lived in a two-room cold-water apartment on the sixth floor of a sordid tenement block overlooking the sea. At one time he had been a thriving coiner, specialising in making coins of the Roman era B.C. He had made considerable sums of money, selling these fakes to art collectors: his sales talk had been as impressive and as convincing as his forgeries. But he had become overambitious in his old age and had attempted to sell a Caesar gold piece to the Washington Museum who had unkindly handed him over to the police. Now, Danny made lead soldiers which he painted in exquisite colours and sold to a speciality toyshop that catered for elderly clients wishing to fight great battles of the previous century.

Danny O’Brien was seventy-three years of age. His only extravagance was a harmless Sunday night orgy when he hired two girls to mime the sexual act while he watched, beer in hand and

projected his mind back to the time when he had been the participant and not the spectator.

Lepski found him at his workbench, a watchmaker's glass in his eye, lovingly applying a coat of scarlet to the trappings of a cavalry officer, made perfectly in lead.

Lepski kicked the door open and breezed in, his thin, tanned face set in a cop scowl, determined to stand no nonsense from this old coot and to rip his arm off if he had to.

Danny looked up, then removed the watchmaker's glass. He was frail looking, balding with a high dome of a forehead. His green eyes were misty and his smile kindly, but vacant. He looked harmless; a nice old man, slightly senile who could be trusted with children. Lepski knew otherwise. Behind the domed forehead was a needle-sharp, cunning brain that might just possibly be now losing some of its edge, but this Lepski doubted.

'Mr. Lepski!' Danny laid down his model soldier and smiled the smile of an old man who has been given an unexpected and expensive present. 'How nice! How are you, Mr. Lepski, and how is Mrs. Lepski? Can I congratulate you yet on your promotion?'

Lepski pulled up a straight-back chair and sat astride it.

'Listen, Danny,' he said in his cop voice, 'cut the oil. Baldy Riccard was in town last Tuesday. He stayed for three days. I want to know what he was doing during those three days . . . so go ahead and tell me.'

'Baldy Riccard?' Danny sat back, his old eyes widening with surprise. He was here? Well! He shook his ageing head. 'Mr. Lepski, I must confess I am a little hurt that he didn't come to see me. After all, one time, we were good friends.' He heaved a sigh that knocked down three of his model soldiers. 'There it is. Ex-criminals don't keep friends. They lead lonely lives. Of course a man with your contacts and with your ambitions, Mr. Lepski, couldn't know nor appreciate what it means to be lonely.'

Lepski smiled: an unpleasant smile of a cynical cop.

'Danny, you may not guess it, but you're heading for a load of trouble,' he said. 'You are going to sing about Baldy or else . . .'

Danny was far too old a hand to react to anything that sounded like a bluff 'You have nothing on me, Mr. Lepski. I told you I haven't seen Baldy.'

'I'm not deaf. Those two whores who come here every Sunday night and perform . . . I'm tossing them in the tank. When they are not wriggling about on your goddamn carpet, they are shoplifting. So they'll go away for a couple of years, and I'll tell them it was you who put the finger on them. How would you like that?'

Danny blinked, telling Lepski from the blink he wouldn't like it.

'I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. Lepski.'

'You're wasting my time. When I have those two bags in the tank, I'm coming after you. How would you like another five years in the cooler, Danny?'

Danny flinched.

'I've done nothing.'

'Of course you haven't, but suppose I found a couple of packets of the white stuff in this hovel? Do you imagine you could talk yourself out of that rap?'

'You wouldn't do a thing like that to an old man, Mr. Lepski.'

There was now a whine in Danny's voice.

Lepski grinned evilly at him.

You can bet your rotten old life that I would and will. Now, are you singing or do I get busy?'

Danny knew when he was beaten. He sat back, his eyes defeated.

'What do you want to know?'

Lepski nodded approvingly.

'That's my fella. I knew you'd get smart. Baldy came to see you, didn't he?'

'If I tell you, Mr. Lepski, will you leave those two girls alone?'

'Sure . . . why should I bother with them? I'll leave you alone too, Danny. . . can't be fairer than that, can I?'

'Yes, he came here. First, he went to Solo, but Solo wouldn't help him, so he came to me. He wanted to borrow five hundred dollars.'

'Why?'

'He said he wanted to hire a boat. I hadn't five hundred dollars so he had to do without his boat.'

'Why did he want a boat?'

Danny hesitated, then seeing Lepski was getting impatient, he said, 'He told me he had to get to Cuba.'

Lepski stared at him.

'Cuba? Why the hell didn't he hijack a plane? Everyone is doing it now, and what the hell did he want to go to Cuba for?'

'He was taking stuff with him. He's a Castro fan.'

'Stuff . . . what do you mean . . . stuff?'

'I don't know, but he had to have a boat so I guess it was something pretty big and heavy.' Danny paused, then went on, 'He was frightened, Mr. Lepski: really frightened. Just looking at him scared me.'

'What do you mean . . . he's a Castro fan?'

'Didn't you know? Baldy is a rabid Commie. He thinks Castro is the greatest man who ever lived.'

Lepski snorted.

'What was this job he pulled in Vero Beach, Danny?'

'I don't know. I heard things, but that means nothing. All I do know it was something big.'

'What did you hear?'

'Rumours. They said Baldy was onto the biggest deal of his life.'

'Who said?'

Danny waved his hands vaguely.

'You know how it is, Mr. Lepski. You stand in a bar and you hear talk. You run into the small men and they talk.'

'And they're saying Baldy's dead, aren't they?'

Danny nodded. 'That's right, but it doesn't mean anything. He could be alive.'

'No, I guess he's dead,' Lepski said firmly. 'Who killed him, Danny?'

'I wouldn't know. I'm not even convinced he is dead.'

Lepski believed him.

'Baldy was a vain bastard,' he said. He always covered his baldpate with a wig. That tells me he had an eye for the girls. Who is his present doll, Danny?'

'I was never close enough to him to talk about his women, Mr. Lepski,' Danny said, but by the way he blinked, Lepski knew he was lying.

'I'll ask that question once again, then those two whores of yours will be in the tank by this afternoon. Who was his girlfriend?'

Danny licked his dry lips, then again made a little gesture of defeat.

'I heard her name was Mai Langley.'

'Who is she . . . where does she hang out?'

'I don't know.'

This time Lepski knew Danny was speaking the truth.

'Gimme the telephone book.'

Danny got up and walked over to his desk. He found a dog-eared telephone book and handed it to Lepski.

It took Lepski only a few seconds to locate Mai Langley. Her address was 1556b Seaview Boulevard, Seacombe.

'Okay, Danny. Keep your mouth shut, and if I were you, I'd cut out this Sunday night caper. It could get you a lapful of the Vice Squad.'

Lepski left the apartment and ran down the stairs, taking two at the time.

Danny waited for a moment, then he went silently to the door and leaned over the bannister rail, watching Lepski as he rushed down the stairs. He returned to his room, shut the door, then checked Mai Langley's telephone number. He dialled the number, thinking it was only fair to give her an anonymous tip-off. The bell rang for some

minutes before he decided she wasn't in.

* * *

Captain of Police Frank Terrell, a big man with sandy hair, with white streaks in it and a jutting aggressive jaw, strode into the Detectives' room and looked around.

Beigler was talking on the telephone. Jacoby was hammering at his typewriter. Fred Hess, in charge of Homicide, short, fat and shrewd, was checking through a report he had just written.

The three men looked up as Terrell closed the door.

Beigler said, 'The Chief's here now. Yeah, I'll tell him. He'll be here for the next hour,' and he hung up.

As Terrell moved to his small office, he said, 'Joe and Fred, come on in. Max, you take care of the desk. Where's Lepski?'

'Talking to Danny O'Brien,' Beigler said, following Hess into Terrell's office. 'Should be here any time now.'

Terrell sat down.

'Charley bringing coffee?'

Like Beigler, Terrell found serious thinking hard without coffee.

'He's coming,' Beigler said as the door opened and Charley Tanner, the desk sergeant of the Charge room, came in with three cartons of coffee which he set on the desk.

'Thanks, Charley,' Terrell said, and when Tanner had left, he looked at Hess. 'Well, Fred?'

'It's the car Baldy hired all right,' Hess said. 'Miami got the Hertz man from Vero Beach to identify it. The Lab boys are working on it now.'

'Chief Franklin said he would phone a report any moment now,' Beigler put in.

Terrell nodded.

'Lepski?'

'He thought it might pay off to talk to O'Brien,' Beigler said and grinned. 'He's bursting with ideas.'

Terrell puffed at his pipe, frowning.

'All this talk about Baldy pulling a big one,' he said, looking at Hess. 'Do you think it means anything?'

'Yes . . . there's too much talk for it not to. It's my guess he pulled a hijack . . . that's why there's been no complaint.'

Outside, they heard an excited voice bawl: 'Is the Chief in?'

'Lepski,' Beigler said with a grin. He got up and opened the door. 'Come on in Sherlock.'

Lepski shoved by him and rushed up to Terrell's desk.

'Chief, I'm on to something hot!' Concisely, he told the three

listening men of his interview with Danny O'Brien, carefully omitting how he obtained his information, knowing his method would have been frowned on by Terrell. 'So I did a quick think and came up with *Cherchez le femme*.' He too had been slightly influenced by Jacoby's efforts to better himself.

'La femme, stupid,' Hess said.

'Who the hell cares?' Lepski cut the air impatiently with his hand. 'I knew Baldy had to have a piece of tail: that wig of his pointed to it. So I dug around and found her name and address. I went out there after her but she had scrambled and in a hurry. The old biddy who runs the apartment block told me she went off with Baldy on Thursday afternoon in her Volkswagen car.'

Terrell absorbed this, then turning to Beigler, he said, 'Let's pick this woman up, Joe. We know her, don't we?'

'Sure. Mai Langley. One time taxi dancer. Three times convicted for possessing reefers. Now working as a hostess at the Spanish nightclub.'

Lepski gaped at him,

'How the hell did you know that?'

'She's well known as Baldy's girl. I keep tabs on girls like her.'

Beigler looked insufferably smug. 'That's why I'm a sergeant, Lepski.'

The telephone hell rang stopping Lepski's frustrated retort.

Terrell scooped up the receiver.

'Frank?' Terrell recognised the voice of Chief of Police, Miami. 'I thought I'd save you the run out. The lab report's just come through.'

Terrell listened for some minutes while the other three officers watched him.

Then Terrell said, 'Fine . . . thanks, Phil. I'll get my boys moving. No, thanks . . . I can manage. Tell your boys from me they've done a good job and I appreciate it.' He hung up. 'That was Franklin. The Mustang is clean of prints. Someone has gone over it very carefully: not one print, but the Lab boys have identified the sand found in the tyre treads. It's from Hetterling Cove: that out of the way bay outside Miami.'

'I know it,' Beigler said, getting to his feet. 'It's a good place for a burial.'

'That's right, Joe. So we get a dozen men with spades and we'll take a look.'

Beigler left the office, went to his desk and picked up the telephone receiver.

'Fred, when the gang's ready, you take charge,' Terrell went on. He turned to Lepski. 'I want Mai Langley. Find her car number and put out an alert for her.'

Lepski went tearing out of the office to his desk.

‘That guy sure works at it,’ Hess said sourly.

‘When I eventually promote him,’ Terrell said, shaking his head, ‘he probably won’t work at all.’

* * *

By 17.00 that evening, Baldy Riccard’s tortured body had been lifted out of the sand dune.

The group of policemen who had dug him out, sweat streaming off them from their labours in the sweltering sun, stood back, some with handkerchiefs to their noses while Dr. Lowis, the Medical Officer, with two Interns, had the unenviable task of examining the bloated, half-cooked body.

By 22.00 Terrell was reading the M.O’s report while Beigler, a carton of coffee in his hand, sat opposite him and while Hess stared out of the dusty window at the ribbon of traffic moving along Main Street.

Finally, Terrell sat back and laid down the report.

Looks like you’re right, Fred,’ he said. ‘It smells of a hijack. His left foot was held in a fire until his heart gave out. He had three minor stab wounds, not enough to cause death, but he bled a lot. There are no bloodstains in the Mustang so he wasn’t carried to the Cove in the Mustang, but in some other vehicle.’ He paused to think, then went on, ‘Fred, check along Highway 1. See if you can find anyone who saw the Mustang. Check every bar, cafe, gasoline station . . . I don’t have to tell you . . . check.’

Hess grunted and moved his short, heavily built body with surprising swiftness from the small office.

Terrell leaned back in his chair and reached for his pipe.

‘Any ideas, Joe?’

‘A few.’ Beigler sipped some of the half-cold coffee. ‘This Commie angle . . . the Cuban angle . . . the fact Baldy wanted a boat. If you want to go to Cuba these days, it’s dead easy to hijack a plane . . . so why didn’t he do it? Danny says he had stuff with him . . . too heavy to take on a plane. So I’m asking myself what did he steal that was too big and too heavy to take on a plane and something Castro would want?’

‘You think he was working for Castro?’

‘It adds up, doesn’t it?’

‘Yes.’ Terrell looked worried. We’ll give it a couple more days, then if we don’t come up with something, we’ll have to hand it over to the C.I.A.’

Beigler grimaced.

‘So let’s come up with something in a couple of days, Chief,’ he said.

* * *

The guidebook tells us that Vero Beach is a citrus shipping port, extending across Indian River to the open sea. It is also a small, busy town with streets bordered with coconut trees, date palms and flowering shrubs.

Lepski arrived at the waterfront around 18.00. He had driven fast with his siren blasting, taking a delight in scaring the traffic the hell out of his way: Lepski still had something of the little boy in him.

During his years as police officer, he had made it his business to develop contacts in every town within two hundred miles of Paradise City. His contact in Vero Beach was Do-Do Hammerstein who ran a waterfront restaurant called The Lobster & The Crab which was a meeting place for the big and little crooks, the drug pushers, and the hot boys who stopped off at Vero Beach to find a motorboat that would take them out of reach of the long arm of the F.B.I, and the C.I.A.

The Lobster & The Crab was a shabby three-storey wooden building sandwiched between a Bottled Gas Suppliers and a Deep Sea Fishing Tackle Emporium. Even as Lepski approached it, he could smell lobsters grilling and the whiff of garlic that Do-Do used in all her sauces. His stomach rumbled with appreciation, but he knew he would have no time for a free meal.

He shoved open the double swing doors and entered the big room, crowded with tables at which sat an assortment of Do-Do’s regular clients: flashily dressed men, most of them dark skinned, small with flat gangster eyes and their raucous women, most of them wearing stretch pants and minute bras which squeezed their soft breasts into gross balloons.

There was an immediate hush as Lepski made his way to the bar. Four men, sitting near the entrance, abruptly got up and slid out into the fading sunshine. The rest, their faces sudden blank masks continued to pick at their lobsters. Even the women, compulsive talkers as they were, lowered their voices so the roaring sound that Lepski had first encountered as he had entered was like a bellowing transistor abruptly tinned down.

Do-Do regarded him with a furious how-could-you-do-this-tome expression as Lepski came to rest at the bar. She was a big woman with an enormous, floppy bosom, dyed red hair and an uninteresting face that could have been carved out of hard pig fat. Only her eyes showed that behind the facade of fat and floppiness, she was as hard

as teak and as unreliable as a greased pole.

‘Scotch,’ Lepski said, resting his elbows on the counter. ‘How are tricks, Do-Do? You look good enough to be stuffed and put in an oven.’

Do-Do poured the drink.

‘Do you have to come in here?’ she asked, keeping her voice low. ‘Haven’t you enough brains to see you are ruining my business?’

‘I want to talk to you. I’ll go around the back in a moment. Be there.’

Do-Do scowled at him and moved away.

Lepski took a little time with his drink, then when he had finished it, he dropped a dollar on the counter and made for the door. As the door’s swung after him, the noise of voices started up again.

Five minutes later, he was sitting in Do-Do’s private living room on the first floor nursing another Scotch while she stood by the window, looking down at the busy harbour where the sponge fishing boats were unloading.

‘What the hell do you think you’re doing?’ she said, keeping her broad back turned to him. ‘You scared away four good customers. You’ve fouled up my restaurant. Don’t you understand a cop is as welcome here as a skunk?’ She swung around; her eyes flashing furiously. ‘Another visit like this, Lepski, and you and me don’t work together.’

Lepski sipped his Scotch.

‘Put that big fanny of yours in a chair, Do-Do,’ he said. ‘You and me will always work together until I say so.’ He paused and stared at her with his cop eyes, then grinned. ‘Come on, you great, fat baby, sit down and don’t talk rough to me.’

‘One of these days I hope someone with sense will put a slug into you,’ Do-Do said, but she lowered her great body into a chair. ‘I’ll send flowers, but I won’t cry. What is it?’

‘I’m looking for Mai Langley,’ Lepski said.

Do-Do sighed and shook her head with grudging admiration.

‘You’re a clever bastard. I can’t think why you haven’t been upgraded.’

‘Jealousy,’ Lepski said bitterly. ‘You mean she’s here?’

‘Yes, she’s here. Is she hot? I wouldn’t have taken her in if I’d known she was hot.’

Lepski sneered.

‘Oh, yeah? I want to talk to her . . . she isn’t hot yet, but she could be. When did she arrive?’

‘A couple of days ago.’

‘Alone?’

‘Of course. This is a respectable house!’

'I knew there was something about it I didn't like,' Lepski said, grinning. 'Is she in now?'

'In? She hasn't moved from her room for two days. She's acting like a fugitive from a Hitchcock movie.'

Lepski finished his drink and stood up.

'What room?'

Do-Do held out her big white hand. With a resigned shake of his head, Lepski produced his wallet and handed her a \$10 bill.

'Don't ruin yourself,' Do-Do said with disgust. She put the bill down into her cleavage.

'You keep that there long enough and it will hatch out,' Lepski said. 'What room?'

'Twenty-three.' As Lepski started for the door, she went on, 'Next time you call come around the back.'

'Sure. So long, Do-Do. Watch out you don't catch your dairy in a revolving door.'

He made his way up the stairs to the next floor. He paused outside Room 23, put his ear against the door panel and listened. He could hear a radio playing swing softly. He put his hand on his gun butt and the other on the door handle, then walked in.

The girl who was lying on the divan in bra and panties cowered against the wall at the sight of him, her large eyes opening wide, her mouth turning slack with terror. She was around

twenty-five years of age, vapidly pretty, with long blonde hair and a fringe.

Lepski could see in a moment she would begin screaming. He said sharply, 'Police . . . relax. Take a look.' He tossed his shield which fell by her side, then he closed the door.

She stared at the shield, then grabbed up a wrap and covered herself. She stared at him, her eyes still dark with terror.

Lepski pulled up a chair, sat astride it, pushed his hat to the back of his head and produced a pack of cigarettes. He fed one into his mouth, set fire to it with a kitchen match which he ignited with his thumbnail then satisfied he was giving her a movie image of a tough cop, he suddenly smiled at her.

'Hi, Mai . . . what's scaring you?'

'What do you want?' she said huskily. 'You can't come busting in like this . . . get out!'

'I'm looking for Riccard,' Lepski said. 'You and he left Paradise three days ago. Where is he?'

'I don't know.'

'Try and do better than that, baby. Who is he running away from?'

She flinched and shook her head.

‘I don’t know.’

Lepski stabbed a forefinger in her direction.

‘If this is all I’m going to get out of you, you and me will have to take a ride back to headquarters when you will be shut up in a smelly cell and you won’t get your fix. You wouldn’t like that, would you?’

Her eyes burned with sudden hate.

‘I tell you I don’t know!’ she said shrilly. ‘You can’t take me in! You’ve got nothing on me! Get out!’

Lepski shook his head sadly.

‘When I call on junkies who I think won’t cooperate, baby, I bring along some of the white stuff. I tell my Chief I found it in her purse. Invariably he believes me, invariably he puts her in the tank. That’s the way it is, baby. Sorry . . . it’s a rotten way to live, but we all have our jobs to do. Where’s Baldy?’

‘I don’t know.’ She hesitated, then seeing Lepski was losing his smile, she went on hurriedly, ‘Someone was after him. He came to me and asked me to drive him here. I did. He was trying to hire a boat, but after the first time, no one would rent him one. He was in a terrible state. He told me to stay with Do-Do and he hired a car and went back to Paradise City. He said he was going to leave his bag at the airport. He said he had friends in Paradise and he could raise some money. He left me here and I haven’t seen him since.’

Lepski turned this over in his mind. He decided that most of it was true, but not all of it.

‘What do you mean . . . he was trying to hire a boat, but after the last time, no one would rent him one?’

‘He was here a couple of months ago. He hired a motor boat and ran into trouble. The boat was sunk.’

Lepski squinted at her.

‘Sunk? How?’

‘Someone shot holes in it. Don’t ask me. I don’t know. He didn’t tell me. All I know is the boat was sunk.’

‘Who rented the boat to him?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘Who were his friends in Paradise?’

Mai hesitated, then said sullenly, ‘Solo Dominico and Danny O’Brien.’

Well, that checked, Lepski thought. At least she seemed to be telling the truth.

‘So he left you here and took his bag back to Paradise City’s airport. Why did he do that?’

‘He wanted a safe place to leave the bag.’

‘Why?’

‘There was something in it he wanted to guard.’

‘What?’

She clenched her fists.

‘I don’t know. Why don’t you leave me alone?’

‘Did he say he wanted to guard something in the bag?’

‘Yes.’

‘But he didn’t say what?’

‘No.’

‘And you didn’t ask him?’

‘No.’

‘How big was the bag, Mai?’

‘An ordinary suitcase . . . white plastic with a red band around it . . . an ordinary suitcase.’

Lepski stiffened. He had a feeling he was walking over someone’s grave.

‘Let’s have that again.’

She stared at him. The tip of her tongue passed over her lips.

‘It was just an ordinary suitcase.’

‘Go on . . . describe it.’

‘Oh, for God’s sake. It was old and shabby and white, made of plastic with a red band painted around it.’

Lepski decided fate was taking a hand in getting him his promotion.

It was only with difficulty that he kept his face deadpan.

‘Now tell me who he was afraid of.’

She shifted further back on the divan, her eyes suddenly scared.

‘I told you . . . I don’t know.’

Lepski got to his feet. He picked up his shield and put it in his wallet. He was now sure she did know who was after Baldy and this could come out only under an official interrogation. He was wasting time trying to get anything further out of her.

‘Okay, Mai, get your clothes on. We’re going to Headquarters.’

‘I told you, I don’t know! You can’t take me back!’

‘Don’t get excited,’ Lepski said. ‘You’ve got to come, baby. You’ve already talked too much. So get your clothes on. Don’t mind me. I’m a married man.’

Then two things happened almost at once. The door flung open and Mai screamed as she threw herself flat on the divan, burying her face in the cover as if trying to hide herself.

Lepski swung around.

A short, squat man, a white handkerchief masking his face, was already shooting. Lepski saw the gun flashes, saw Mai bounce high on the divan, saw blood spray the wall as bullets smashed into her head. Then he threw himself flat, clawing at his gun as the door slammed shut.

He was up again, gun in hand, racing for the door as feet pounded down the stairs.

He could hear Do-Do screaming and again the deafening bang of a gun. He reached the head of the stairs to find Do-Do's vast body blocking the corridor. He took the flight in a leap, crashing onto the lower landing, jarring his bones, staggered, recovered himself as he heard the roar of a high powered car taking off.

By the time he had got onto the waterfront, the large, excited milling crowd made any attempt at pursuit impossible.

Chapter Six

As red streaks began to lighten the night sky, Harry Mitchell came cautiously out of his cabin. He had on swim trunks and was carrying Baldy Riccard's suitcase. The only two things he had kept from the case was the Luger automatic pistol and the box of cartridges. These he had hidden under a loose board by his bed.

He stood in the doorway for a long moment. The time was 04.55. No lights showed. Nothing was to be heard except the rustling of palm leaves as the slight breeze stirred the hot air.

Satisfied he had the place to himself, he walked quickly and silently down to the beach and into the sea. He turned on his back, holding the suitcase on his chest, and with powerful leg movements, headed away from the shore. When he was above deep water, he twisted over, releasing the case. Then diving, he followed its slow descent until it settled on the ocean bed. He surfaced and peered down, but the suitcase was gone: only the inky water marked the spot where it was.

He swam slowly back to the beach, and as he began to walk across the sand to his cabin, he saw a light go up in Solo Dominico's room.

He reached the cabin, shut himself in and dried himself off.

Then he put on slacks, a short-sleeved shirt and rope soled shoes.

He had a little over twenty minutes before he had to join Solo. He sat on his bed and lit a cigarette. While he smoked, his mind went to the previous night. He felt hot blood move through his veins as he pictured again his explosive coupling with Nina. As a sexual experience, this had been unique. He thought of his dead wife, Joan, who had been afraid of sex, and with whom he finally was unable to live. The draft order, calling him to the Army, when he had almost made up his mind to leave her, had given him the welcomed excuse. So he had gone. He had realised when he got the news of her suicide that he had failed to conceal his eagerness to leave her. He hadn't intentionally meant to hurt her, but because the two years he had lived with her had stifled him as nothing he could imagine could ever stifle a man, he had become indifferent to her feelings. If he had been more patient, he told himself, more understanding, if he had made an effort to help her, they might have ironed out their problems.

Thinking about this and thinking honestly, he doubted it. Sex to him was the most natural thing: something to enjoy, not to brood about, not to make more important than anything else in his life. Sex was to have when the urge came and to wait for when the urge wasn't

there. Her complications and her fears had hurt him, then finally bored him.

There was a letter waiting for him when he left the ship at Saigon. She said she was a mess. One of the things for which he had once loved her was her complete honesty. She said she should never have married, and she was sorry.

She concluded: *I guess I'm not the only woman who feels as I do, Harry. It's not that I am incapable of loving a man - it's the bed business I can't go along with. I do love you . . . enough to give you your freedom. Be happy, Harry. Find some other girl who is not the mess I am. I am a mess . . . such a mess. I don't want to go on. They say you come back again. With luck, I might have a second chance. It would be wonderful if we met again, after years and years, and I wasn't the mess I am now, wouldn't it? Goodbye. Joan.*

He had a telegram from his father saying she had been found in the bath with her wrists slashed and he had better apply for compassionate leave and come home. But there was a battle about to begin, and Harry didn't apply for leave. He went into battle, depressed and shocked and guilt ridden. By the time the battle was over, after he had seen the dead and the wounded, after he had dropped out of the hot sky through a hail of machine gun bullets, after he had spent two weeks in a foxhole, hating himself for his own awful body smell and after he had killed four little yellow men, Joan's suicide was no longer important.

More important to him had been Nhan, the Vietnamese girl whom he had discovered on a street corner, stirring a delicious smelling soup made in a battered can that had once held a gallon of sweet-sour cucumbers. The whiff of cooking had made him stop, and he had squatted by her side, accepting the bowl of soup she had offered, and they had talked.

Nhan spoke fair English. She wore her long, black hair in a pigtail: that told him she was a virgin: only married Vietnamese women wore their hair up.

He had been on leave for two weeks. Every morning around 11.00, he had arrived at the street corner to drink Nhan's soup. Then one day, he discovered he was in love with her. Later, she told him she had fallen in love with him the moment she had seen him.

They had begun an association which was to Harry the fulfillment of a dream: love with no complications.

He stubbed out his cigarette, wincing as he thought of that day when he had come back to Saigon after four weeks in the bullet torn paddy field and was told Nhan was dead. A bomb, viciously tossed into the market, had killed ten Vietnamese, including Nhan, plastering their bodies against a wall in a messy horror that had to be hosed

away by the fire brigade.

Harry rubbed his temples with his fingers. Now last night and the beginning of something new. This was his first encounter with a woman who felt about sex as he did: utterly uninhibited, using him to satisfy her sexual demands. Thinking about this, Harry decided it was what he needed. He was sick of complications: so sick of women who gave themselves to him only to involve him, to shackle him, to stifle him in their web of possessiveness.

Nina, with her sensual beauty, had been a devastating surprise of the unexpected. Now, she promised to give him what he had been seeking.

He remembered Randy's warning: She's for nobody, unless you want to tangle with Solo.

Solo didn't worry him. He was sure that if it came to a real fight, he could take Solo, but that wasn't the problem. Solo was Nina's father.

He rubbed his temples, frowning. She had come to him. She had thrown herself at him. Could Solo complain? His chattel, she had said. What right had any father to regard his daughter as his chattel?

Complications . . . problems . . . complications . . . problems.

Impatiently, Harry got to his feet and left the cabin. He went along to the kitchen where he found Solo sipping steaming coffee, a cigar between his thick fingers as he sat at the table, the overhead light casting his enormous shadow half on the table and half on the floor.

'Hi, Harry!' Solo grinned. 'I tried to tell you last night. I won't need you this morning. I want you to get on with the high dive board. I talked to Hammerson. He is sending the timber this morning.' Solo's little eyes screwed up as he regarded Harry. 'I came to your cabin late to tell you, but you weren't there.' He leaned forward, his eyes quizzing. 'Did you find a little girl to spread on the sand?'

His face wooden, Harry said, 'That's my business, Solo.'

Solo finished his coffee at a gulp.

'I don't care if you stick it into them, Harry, but no pups. I don't want trouble around my beautiful restaurant.'

'I am an adult,' Harry said impatiently. 'I'm not one of your hired kids . . . relax.'

'Yeah . . . I was forgetting. Excuse me.' Solo crossed the kitchen and picked up four big wicker baskets. 'You get on with the high dive board, hey?' He started for the door, then paused, his head on one side as he peered at Harry. 'What did you say you were?'

'An adult . . . a grown up person.' Harry felt a warning prickle of danger.

'Is that right? A grown up person, hey?' Solo suddenly released a

harsh bellow of laughter. 'Excuse me. That's what we're all supposed to be . . . hey?'

'That's the theory,' Harry said quietly.

'But some are more than others, hey?' Solo's little eyes turned misty. 'I bet you think you're a little more grown up than me, hey?'

'Did I say so, Solo?'

'Oh no, but then you say very little, Harry, and that makes you a very smart boy.' Solo opened the door. 'I'll be back around ten.' He went out into the half-light and Harry, standing motionless, waited for some minutes. It wasn't until he heard the Buick start up and drive away that he relaxed. He looked at his wristwatch. The time was 05.40. He crossed to the stove, took off the coffee pot and poured himself a cup.

Something wrong, he thought. Could Solo have become suspicious already? He sipped the hot, black coffee, uneasy and puzzled. Something wrong, he told himself again.

'Harry?'

The soft whisper made him turn sharply, slopping his coffee.

Nina stood in the doorway. She had on a shortie, see-through nightdress, her silky hair in disorder. She looked as if she had just rolled out of bed.

Harry felt a rush of blood through his body at the sight of her. He put down the cup and crossed towards her. She retreated, beckoning to him. Following her down the passage, he came to her room.

He was too aware of her to register much of the room except it seemed to fit her personality. It was bright, gay, big and neat and a blaze of colours.

He stood by the door which he had closed and watched her slip out of her nightdress. Then naked, she faced him, her arms thrown wide, her lips parted in a fixed smile of desire, her dark nipples erect and hard.

Again Harry felt the prickle of danger.

I am an adult, he had said to Solo. Was this true? Was this blatant sexual offering something a thinking adult could possibly accept? Wasn't he really acting like one of those goddamn adolescents like Randy?

She moved to the bed and lowered herself onto it, looking at him.

'Come to me.'

He longed to throw off his clothes and join her, but there was this warning bell ringing in his mind. He must not let any woman dominate him: even a woman who apparently was demanding nothing in return.

He remained by the door.

'Put on your swimsuit, Nina,' he said, his voice unsteady. 'Let's

swim.'

'Later . . . come to me.'

She leaned back on her elbows, her knees slightly apart: there was naked desire in her eyes that hammered at his determination.

'I'll wait,' he said and went from the room. He walked slowly back to the kitchen and poured himself another cup of coffee. He saw his hands were shaking. He spooned sugar into the cup, spilling sugar on the floor. He sipped the coffee, staring out of the window at the lightening sky. He heard her come down the passage and he turned, his heart thumping.

She was wearing a scarlet bikini, a towel in her hand. She smiled at him.

'So let's swim.'

He stopped at his cabin to put on his wet swim trunks while she walked on slowly across the sand. When he reached the beach, she was swimming well and strongly, and with a racing dive, he went after her. When he caught up with her, she trod water and smiled at him.

'You are an odd ball, Harry. Couldn't you have given me a little pleasure?' She flicked water into his face and then dropped on her back, still smiling at him.

'I had been talking to Solo,' Harry said. 'He was too close. I keep remembering he is your father.'

'Phooey! In another hour, everyone will be up. Let's swim back. You can't be this stupid! I want to be loved!'

'It's too dangerous. Even this is dangerous. Do you want me to have trouble with your father?'

'Are you frightened of him?'

'No, but I am frightened of what could happen. I could kill him . . . I might have to kill him.' He peered at her in the half-light. 'Would you want that?'

She grimaced. 'You are so serious. Can't you take what I'm offering without all this fuss?'

Harry started back. After a moment, she joined him, saying nothing until they reached the shore. As they walked up the slope that led to dry sand, she said, 'So when do we make love again?'

'Is there any chance of me going with you to Sheldon Island on Sunday?'

She stopped abruptly.

'Who told you about Sheldon Island?'

'Randy . . . he said you went there to be alone.'

She smiled.

'That's a marvellous idea . . . there we can be alone for hours and hours. My father sleeps most of Sunday. The restaurant is closed. He

lets me have the boat. Yes . . . then Sunday.'

'Okay. The day after tomorrow. Keep away from me until then, Nina. I'll meet you at the boat station at six o'clock.'

'Yes . . . I'll bring food.'

He left her and reentered the sea, swimming with swift strong strokes towards the coral reef where he planned to build the high dive board.

* * *

Lieutenant Alan Lacey of the Miami Homicide Squad was a little man with a hatchet-shaped face, thin lips and small eyes that were as animated as sea washed pebbles. He was a man disliked by the Force, by criminals and even by his wife. He liked being disliked. He felt he was achieving something by making people afraid of him. He was a man of cunning rather than brains. At the age of fifty-seven, he was very conscious that he now would remain a Lieutenant and further promotion was out of his reach. This soured him. Any smart cop, any ambitious, eager young recruit was immediately submitted to his sadistic, razor-sharp tongue. If there was anything Lieutenant Lacey hated more than anything else, it was an ambitious cop.

He arrived outside The Lobster & Crab in his immaculate Jaguar, bought with his wife's money, accompanied by Sergeant Pete Weidman: fat, fast and stupid who only held his position as Sergeant because he was Lacey's stooge, whipping boy and yes-man.

As these two police officers arrived, an ambulance came to rest outside the restaurant and two interns hurried in. There were four mobile cops standing around with bored expressions and Lepski was standing near them, looking hot and uncomfortable.

Lepski knew he shouldn't be here: that he was off his territory. He also knew all about Lieutenant Lacey and what to expect. There was a good chance now that Lacey would file a report against him that could blow his ambitions to become Detective 1st Grade sky high.

While waiting for Lacey to arrive, Lepski decided, when Lacey interrogated him, to say as little as possible and to act as dumb as possible, then if the going got too hot, to pass the buck to Captain Terrell who most certainly would handle Lieutenant Lacey whereas Lepski as Detective 2nd Grade was in a hopeless tactical position.

Lepski, sweating, watched Lacey, followed by Weidman, get out of the Jaguar Lacey surveyed the crowd surrounding the entrance to the restaurant with cold, stony eyes. He told the four mobile cops to get them moving. He walked by Lepski as if he didn't see him and went to view the bodies. He surveyed Do-Do's mountainous body with a disgusted curl of his lip. He climbed the stairs and surveyed Mai

Langley's body with considerably more interest. He was glad that her head had been damaged and not her body. He allowed his eyes to dwell on her half nakedness until he became aware that Weidman too was staring with fascinated interest.

Lacey snarled: 'What the hell are you staring at?'

Weidman blinked, dragged his eyes away and looked stupidly at the Lieutenant.

'Sir?'

'Haven't you seen a dead woman before?'

'Yes, sir.'

'Well, stop behaving like a goddamn tourist!'

'Yes, sir.'

Lacey took off his hat, smoothed down his hair and replaced his hat.

'Did I see a creep from Paradise City's headquarters out there?'

Weidman blinked. 'I didn't see anyone, sir.'

'But then you never see anything, do you?' Lacey looked around, saw a chair that looked reasonably comfortable and went over and sat in it. He took a sealskin cigar case from his pocket which his wife had given him for a Christmas present, selected a cigar and put it between his small, sharp teeth. 'Bring him up!'

Weidman lumbered away. Five minutes later, he returned with Lepski. Knowing he was in dead trouble, Lepski stood at attention, his eyes fixed on the wall above the Lieutenant's head.

'Who is this man, Sergeant?' Lacey asked as he lit his cigar.

'Detective 2nd Grade Lepski, Paradise,' Weidman said. He had checked as he had come up the stairs with Lepski.

Lacey shook his head.

'I don't believe it. No detective from Paradise would dream of coming onto my territory without permission.' His bleak eyes surveyed Lepski who moved uneasily. 'Or would he?'

'Lieutenant, I was following up a tip,' Lepski said, his expression wooden. 'It was nothing important otherwise I would have reported to you first.'

'Nothing important . . . just two stiff. What do you call important . . . a goddamn massacre?'

'It developed into this, Lieutenant. I was talking to this woman.' Lepski paused to nod to Mai Langley's body, then went on, 'A man burst in and killed her.'

'A man? Where is he?' Lacey regarded his cigar to make sure it was burning evenly.

'He got away.'

'In my territory, a second grade Detective always calls a Lieutenant sir.'

‘He got away, sir.’

‘He got away?’ The exaggerated amazement in Lacey’s voice made Lepski wince. Lacey turned to Weidman. ‘Did you hear that, Sergeant? A vicious gunman came here, killed this woman and then killed another woman and then walked out while one of Paradise City’s so-called officers was right here on the spot.’

Weidman contorted his face to express outrage, but succeeded only in looking like a sow in labour.

Lacey turned back to Lepski.

‘How did he get away?’

‘In a car, sir.’

Lacey smiled: a frosty smile, but a smile.

‘Well, at least, that is something. Give Sergeant Weidman the number of the car and we will trace it. Weidman write down the number.’

Lepski controlled the urge to shuffle his feet.

‘I didn’t get the number, sir. By the time . . .’

‘Okay, okay, you don’t have to paint a picture. Wonderful! This gunman walks in here, kills two women and you let him drive away and don’t even take the number of the car. That’s really something. That’s really something for the record. Did you say you were Third or Second Grade, Lepski?’

‘Second Grade, sir.’

‘Still more wonderful. I always suspected that Paradise City had the worst cops on the coast, now I’m sure of it. Maybe you can give me a description of the man?’

‘He was around five foot five, squat, heavily built, around 160 lbs., masked. He was wearing a peppermint stripe suit, panama hat and carrying a Walther 7.65 automatic,’ Lepski said a little breathlessly. ‘He was wearing a handkerchief as a mask.’

‘You truly amaze me,’ Lacey sneered. ‘Where were you when you observed all this . . . lying on the floor?’

‘Yes, sir. He came in . . .’

‘When I want you to flap with your mouth I’ll ask you,’ Lacey snarled. He paused to draw on his cigar, savoured the smoke that rolled out of his mean little mouth, then he pointed the cigar at Mai Langley’s body. ‘What was she to you?’

‘I’m working on the Baldy Riccard case, sir. She was his girlfriend.’

Lacey flicked ash onto the threadbare carpet.

‘Who the hell cares about Baldy Riccard?’

‘There’s a report that he’s been knocked off. Captain Terrell ordered me to check,’ Lepski said, hoping he was playing a King to a Queen. By the sudden flicker that crossed Lacey’s face, he decided he

had.

'How is Captain Terrell?' Lacey asked. He remembered that Terrell was a close friend of his own Chief. He also remembered his Chief had said only a week or so ago that Lacey was dragging his feet, and when his Chief passed a remark like that, red lights began flashing. Maybe, he thought, he had better go easy with this slob or there might be a boomerang in it. Lacey never placed himself in the path of any boomerang: one of the reasons why he still survived as Lieutenant Homicide.

'He's fine, sir.'

'I'm surprised he could be fine with a poop like you working for him.'

Lepski swallowed the insult and said nothing.

'So what did this woman have to tell you. Detective 2nd Grade Lepski?' Lacey asked, rolling smoke around in his mouth before releasing it in Lepski's direction.

This was something Lepski was determined not to impart.

Had Lacey been cooperative, Lepski would have given him all the information he had, but he was now determined to give him nothing after this treatment.

'I was just asking her, sir, where Baldy could be when this gunman arrived and killed her,'

'So you learned nothing?'

Lepski shuffled his feet, looked hangdog and said nothing. He wasn't going to be caught in a deliberate lie.

Lacey regarded him with distaste.

'Go away, you horrible creep,' he said. 'If ever I find you on my territory without permission again, I'll put you through my special wringer. I am going to put in a report about you, Lepski. It is my urgent hope and prayer that it will break you and one of these days when I visit your City, I will come across you, pounding a beat. Get the hell out of my sight!'

Lepski left. He went down the stairs, shoved his way through the crowd that still surged around the entrance to the restaurant, muttering profanities under his breath. He finally reached his car, got in and slammed the door. He sat for several minutes, trying to control his surging rage. Then as he started the engine, a dirty, ragged little boy with long, black hair and almond shaped eyes stuck his head through the open car window.

'You Lepski?' the boy asked, his worldly eyes searching Lepski's face.

'So I'm Lepski! So, what?'

'She said you'd give me a buck when I gave you her message.' The boy squinted at Lepski thoughtfully. 'Do you have a buck?'

Lepski's fingers like claws tapped on the steering wheel as he fought to control his temper. 'Who said?'

'You gotta buck?'

'What the hell do you think I am . . . a goddamn vagrant?'

'You're a cop, aren't you?' The boy allowed a sneer to run over his dirty face. 'Cops never have any money.'

Lepski was so struck by this home truth that he hastily took out his wallet to make sure he had a dollar. When he found he had thirty dollars, his rage made his head swim.

'I've got a dollar, you little sonofabitch! Who said and what message?'

The boy had already noted the contents of the wallet. He now appeared to be more relaxed in mind.

'Goldie White wants to talk to you. Gimme a buck and I'll give you her address.'

'What makes you think I want to walk to Goldie White whoever the hell she is?' Lepski demanded.

The boy became bored. He sank one dirty finger into his right nostril and began to explore.

'She's Mai Langley's buddy,' he said while exploring. 'Are you giving me the buck or aren't you?'

Lepski looked hurriedly over to the Lobster & Crab. There was no sign yet of Lacey. He plucked a dollar bill from his wallet, then holding onto the bill, he regarded the boy suspiciously.

'Where is she?'

'Gimme the buck.'

'You'll get it. Where is she?'

The boy stopped exploring his right nostril and transferred his attention to his left nostril.

'My dad warned me never to trust a cop. Gimme the buck or the deal's off.'

In his present state of mind, Lepski longed to strangle this dirty brat, but he controlled himself. He handed over the dollar, but as the boy's fingers closed on the bill, Lepski's fingers closed on the boy's wrist.

'Where is she?' Lepski snarled, 'or do I tear your goddamn arm off?'

'23a, Turtle Crawl: third floor,' the boy told him, wrenching his wrist free. He paused long enough to make a fantastically loud and rude noise with his lips, then he was gone. Lepski had no idea where Turtle Crawl Street was. He could have been sold a pup. He became aware that the four mobile cops were now watching him suspiciously. He started the car and drove along the crowded waterfront. When he was far enough out of sight, he stopped by a woman selling turtles and

asked where he could find the street.

‘Second left,’ she told him. ‘How about taking your kids home a turtle, mister?’

‘Who the hell wants a turtle and who the hell would want a kid?’ Lepski snarled and drove on.

He parked his car among the trucks collecting lobsters from a boat that had just docked and walked down the narrow street until he found 23a. He realised if Lieutenant Lacey discovered he was still investigating he was in for a lapful of trouble, but by now Lepski was in such a belligerent mood he didn’t care.

He climbed to the third floor of the building that gave off smells of perfume and rich cooking. As he climbed, he decided he was in one of those blocks given up exclusively to prostitution and which, Lepski decided, must have police protection.

He finally arrived before a door which carried a card, reading: Goldie White, Business hours: 11.00 -13.00 & 20.00 - 23.00.

Lepski blew out his cheeks, shaking his head. The nerve of it, he thought. He rang the bell. There was a little delay, then the door swung open.

Blocking the entrance was a tall, thin man, his face narrow, his chin receding, his black dyed hair also receding, his mouth thin and his eyes shifty. He wore an immaculate cream lightweight suit, a pale blue shirt and a black tie. He looked as prosperous as only a successful pimp can look, and he smelt as gorgeous as only a successful pimp can smell.

He regarded Lepski, then revealed plastic teeth in a welcoming smile.

‘Come in, Mr. Lepski,’ he said, standing aside. ‘Goldie was hoping you would drop in. I’m Jack Thomas, her business manager.’

Lepski moved into the room, comfortably furnished with four lounging chairs, a TV set, a white wool rug and girlie prints of disturbing frankness on the walls.

‘Where is she?’ he demanded. The sight of any pimp sent his blood pressure up, and as his blood pressure had already risen alarmingly after his interview with Lacey, he was now close to flash point.

‘She’ll be along,’ Thomas said airily. He was so occupied with his own charm that he failed to register Lepski’s homicidal state of mind. ‘Sit down, Mr. Lepski. What’ll you drink?’

Lepski breathed heavily, his fingers curling.

‘Where is she?’

‘No drink?’ Thomas sank languidly into a chair. ‘Of course . . . line of duty. I understand. Take a chair, Mr. Lepski. She wanted me to talk to you. I . . .’

‘Get out of that goddamn chair!’ Lepski bellowed. ‘No pimp sits when I’m standing!’

His tone of voice and his expression made Thomas leave the chair as if he had been kicked out of it. He gaped at Lepski, his face paling and he backed away.

‘Get your whore!’ Lepski snarled, ‘and then get out! One more minute of your stinking company will make me throw up!’

As Thomas turned wildly to the door of an inner room, the door opened and a girl came out. She paused in the doorway while she looked at Lepski and then at Thomas.

‘Okay, Jack, beat it. I’ll handle it,’ she said.

Goldie White was a nicely stacked blonde with cold good looks that would attract most men if they were drunk enough to be reckless. She was certainly corrupt and looked confident enough to handle anything in trousers from a man to an ape. She was wearing an orange coloured sweater that revealed her medically inflated mammary equipment and a mini skirt that showed off her thighs. Her eyes were interesting: they could grow hot, cold, steely, greedy, seductive and dumb with the acrobatic agility of a kaleidoscope.

Thomas slid around Lepski, muttered something, then left. He slammed the front door after him. For a long moment, Lepski and the girl listened to his departing footfalls as he raced down the stairs.

Lepski crossed to the door and turned the key. He wasn’t risking another unexpected shooting.

‘I got your message,’ he said, coming away from the door. ‘It cost me a buck. Bucks are important to me. So go ahead and make it good.’

Goldie moved towards a chair, her body undulating with the effortless movement of a snake.

‘Don’t act so tough, Lepski,’ she said. ‘Can’t you see your act is like a 1945 movie?’

Lepski grinned evilly.

‘It works, baby. It’s a method I dig for. Look how it worked with your ponce.’

‘Him!’ Goldie grimaced. ‘If a baby shook his fist at him he would faint. I’m sorry for the creep. He has cold water for blood. But never mind him. You are here . . . I’m here . . . so let’s get acquainted.’ She sat down, spread her legs so he could see her pink nylon covered crotch and regarded him with her sexy look that seldom failed to get results. ‘Come on, tough cop. Before we talk business, reduce me to a jelly.’

‘That will be a pleasure,’ Lepski said.

He crossed the room and paused before her. As she began to pull up her sweater, he swung his hand and slapped her hard on her right cheek.

She reared back, her head slamming against the back of the chair. She recovered her balance and her face turned into an angry, snarling mask.

‘You stinking, goddamn . . . she began when his hard hand slapped again, jerking her head back.

Lepski eyed her and then moved away.

‘Listen, baby, I take nothing from any whore. I wouldn’t touch you, wrapped in plastic. I’m busy. I’ve spent a buck. So sit up and talk fast and stop acting like a whore in a 1945 movie.’ He suddenly grinned. ‘And let me remind you you are now talking to a cop who is a better animal than you, but not much better.’

She drew in a long breath, touched her face tenderly, stared at him, then the rage slowly died out of her eyes.

‘You’re quite a man,’ she said huskily. ‘Let’s go to bed, damn it! I think you could launch me off my pad.’

‘Let’s talk.’ Lepski sat opposite her. ‘When I’m on police duty, there’s no count down for my rocket.’

She laughed.

‘I like that . . . a witty cop! Okay, so you are a stinking sonofabitch, but let’s talk. Give me a cigarette.’

‘I wouldn’t give you a kiss of life,’ Lepski said. ‘Talk . . . I want to get out of here.’

She took a cigarette from the box on the table, looked at him for a light, then seeing he wouldn’t give her one, she used a match.

‘Jack wants his boat back,’ she said. ‘I told him if anyone could get it for him you could.’

Lepski took a cigarette from his pack. As he set fire to it, he shook his head.

‘That crap doesn’t dazzle me. Let’s have it right from the beginning and fast. I have better things to do than to share the same air with you.’

‘Baldy Riccard talked Jack into renting his boat. The boat’s vanished. Jack’s blowing his stack He wants his boat back.’

‘When did he rent his boat to Baldy?’

‘Two months ago . . . March 24th if you want it exact.’

‘Why?’

‘What does it matter? He rented it. Now there’s talk that Baldy is dead. Jack must have his boat: all his money is tied up in it.’

‘I asked you: why did he rent the boat to Baldy?’

Goldie hesitated, then said, ‘Baldy offered five hundred bucks. Jack would rent his mother to a circus for that kind of money. I told him he was out of his mind, but he wouldn’t listen to me. Do you have to keep asking questions?’

Lepski rolled his cigarette around in lips as he squinted at her.

‘Why did Baldy want the boat?’

‘He was going on a trip.’

‘Is that right? I didn’t imagine he wanted the boat to file his nails with. What trip? Where?’

Goldie again hesitated.

‘You cops! You make me sick! Always questions and no action. If you must know . . . Havana. He said he would be back in three weeks: it’s now eight weeks. Now we hear he was in Paradise City last Tuesday and the creep hasn’t been to see us. Now they say he is dead.’ Again she hesitated, then went on, ‘Jack’s not only worried about his boat, he’s worried about Jacey and Hans.’

Lepski ran his fingers through his hair.

‘Jacey and Hans? Who are they?’

‘The crew, stupid! You don’t imagine Baldy could take a boat to Havana on his own, do you?’

Lepski drew in a long, exasperated breath.

‘Are you telling me the crew as well as the boat are missing?’

She slid her hand under her sweater to scratch her ribs.

‘Do you have wax in your ears? Isn’t that what I said? The crew and the boat are missing.’

‘So two men are missing for eight weeks and no one has reported it? Is that right?’

Goldie shrugged.

‘They are homos. Who cares about homos?’

‘But Thomas didn’t go to the police? So why is he worried now about them?’

‘He’s not all that worried about them. He’s worried about his boat.’

‘Why didn’t he report all this?’

Goldie scratched some more under her sweater.

‘Are you really as dumb as you sound?’ She looked wonderingly at him. ‘So Jack goes to the cops. He tells them his boat is missing and Hans and Jacey are missing. So what do the goddamn cops do? Do they look for the boat? Do they look for Jacey and Hans? That’s a laugh. They twist Jack’s arm and want to know where he found the money to buy the boat.’

Lepski knew this was right.

‘So what do you think I am . . . I am a cop, damn it!’

She relaxed back, regarding him.

‘Oh sure, but you’re off your territory. That’s why I told Jack you might be able to do something about his boat without involving him.’

Lepski turned this over in his mind. He realised she had something.

He pulled out his notebook.

‘Give me a description of the boat.’

‘It’s a forty foot launch, painted white; the cockpit painted red. Her name and port are in red: Gloria II. Vero Beach.’

‘How is she powered?’

‘Twin diesel if that means anything to you: it just means two screws to me.’

Lepski scowled.

‘Cops can be witty, but not whores. How about the crew?’

‘Hans Larsen: tall, blond, twenty-five years of age, a Dane. Jacey Smith, small thin, broken nose, a negro.’

Lepski paused in his writing and regarded her with grudging admiration.

‘It’s a shame your brains are between your legs,’ he said. ‘If you moved them up to your head you could have made a good cop.’

She sneered.

‘Who wants to be a good cop?’

Lepski shook his head in despair.

‘Who was Baldy scared of?’

‘Everything . . . everyone.’

Lepski paused to light another cigarette, then he said in his cop voice, ‘If you go vague on me, I’ll toss you to the wolves. Keep talking and you and me are buddies: start stalling and you’re headed for the tank.’

Goldie’s mouth twisted into a contemptuous sneer.

‘Wake up, Lepski! You’re off your territory. You wouldn’t dare take me in. Lacey would castrate you.’

Lepski knew that was possible. He rubbed the end of his nose with his pencil.

‘Don’t let’s argue,’ he said. ‘Baldy was scared. Everyone tells me he was scared. If you want me to find the boat, I must know who was scaring him. It’s as simple as that.’

‘I don’t know. Jack doesn’t know. Yes, Baldy was scared. He pulled a big job and it turned out to be too big.’

‘How do you know?’

‘He told us. He said it was the biggest job he had ever pulled.’

‘I know all that,’ Lepski said impatiently. ‘What was the job?’

‘Do you imagine we were crazy enough to ask him?’

Lepski decided she was telling the truth.

‘Fifteen minutes ago, a gunman walked into Mai Langley’s room and put a slug in her head,’ he said after a pause. ‘You know that, don’t you?’

‘Yes. When you live the way Jack and I have to live, you have to know what’s going on . . . sometimes before it happens.’ Goldie was now speaking quietly and her eyes were troubled. ‘A friend called us.’

‘And if Mai hadn’t had her head shot off, you wouldn’t now be flapping with your mouth?’

Goldie lit another cigarette. Lepski saw her hand was unsteady.

‘This is a mess,’ she said. ‘Someone is shutting mouths.’ For the first time since he had been in the room, he saw she was losing her poise. Fear was beginning to show in her eyes. ‘What are you going to do for us, Lepski?’

‘On what you’ve given me so far, nothing,’ Lepski said bluntly. ‘Use your head, baby. If you can’t put a finger on the man who was scaring Baldy and who shot Mai, what can I do?’

‘If I could, I’d tell you. I don’t damn well know!’

Lepski felt he had stayed too long. Every minute he remained on Lacey’s territory was one more minute to his disadvantage.

He got to his feet.

‘I’ll tell you something. Before Mai was knocked off she said the boat Baldy had hired had been sunk. This is strictly between you and me. I don’t know how Mai knew this. I didn’t have time to find out. But she said it was sunk. She said someone had shot holes in it.’ He regarded her dismay. ‘You start working out who could have shot holes in the boat. Tell Jack to use his brains to find out too . . . if he has any brains. Then if you get an idea, call me at headquarters.’

‘Do you mean you knew all the time Jack’s boat is sunk?’ Goldie yelled.

‘Don’t go shrill on me, baby. If you and Jack don’t come up with some ideas fast you’ll both see the inside of the tank as accessories.’

Leaving her, Lepski ran down the stairs, reached his car and set off fast on his journey back to Paradise City.

Chapter Seven

With the help of Charley and Mike, Harry finished constructing a pair of foot-sockets with the cement they had ferried over in the dinghy to the coral reef. These sockets were to take the arms of the high dive board.

‘Okay, boys,’ Harry said after surveying the work. ‘We’ll let this lot set. Tomorrow, we’ll get the arms up.’ It was now after 11.00 and the sun was hot. Harry left the two negroes to row back and he swam to the shore, the warm sea washing away the sweat that had been pouring off him while he had been working on the reef.

As there were as yet only five or six sunbathers under the umbrellas he made his way to the bar, his throat aching for an ice cold Coke.

Joe, the barman, had the Coke ready as Harry slid onto the high stool.

‘I see you’ve been working out there, Mr. Harry,’ he said. ‘Plenty hot, huh?’

Harry drank, finished the Coke and pushed the empty glass towards Joe.

‘Sure was. Let’s have another, Joe. Solo back yet?’

‘Not yet.’ A second Coke slid across the counter. ‘Mr. Harry . . .’

Harry reached for the glass, then looked inquiringly at the tall, powerfully built negro.

‘What is it, Joe?’

Joe shifted uneasily. He looked around the deserted bar, then through the window at the car park, then back to Harry.

‘I once won a silver medal for the long jump at the Olympics, Mr. Harry.’

Surprised, Harry smiled.

‘Is that right? Congratulations, Joe.’

‘So I reckon we have something in common, Mr. Harry.’

‘Cut out the mister, will you? Of course we have a lot in common.’

Joe shook his head.

‘Not a lot, but the Olympics is something special.’

‘It certainly is.’ Harry was puzzled. He looked inquiringly at the big negro. ‘Have you something on your mind, Joe?’

‘You could say that.’ Joe again looked out of the window, then leaning forward, lowering his voice, he said, ‘You’d better get away from here, Mr. Harry. It’s not healthy.’

Harry regarded Joe who stared at him, his big, black eyes

troubled.

‘Just what does that mean?’

‘It’s a friendly warning. Pack and go. You have no friends here, Mr. Harry, except me and Randy. No friends . . . I mean that, and there’s trouble coming for you.’

‘Come on, Joe. If you know something, tell me,’ Harry said, his voice a little impatient.

‘Mr. Solo is my boss. I owe him a living,’ Joe said, paused, then went on, ‘No one has ever knocked him off his feet and Mr. Solo is a dangerous man. That’s all, Mr. Harry. Just get away fast . . . don’t trust anyone, but me and Randy.’ Joe moved to the far end of the bar and began to busy himself preparing canapés for the noon hour rush.

Harry hesitated, then seeing by the negro’s expression he wasn’t going to tell him anything more, he finished his drink and left the bar. He started towards his cabin as Randy appeared from his. Seeing him, Randy beckoned, then stepped back into his cabin.

Harry joined him.

‘Shut the door.’ There was a quaver in Randy’s voice. ‘Seen this?’ He pointed to a newspaper spread out on the table.

Harry closed the door, crossed to the table and bent over the newspaper.

Staring up at him was a photograph of Baldy Riccard. The caption read: *Found Dead, Have You Seen This Man?*

A jolt shot through Harry. Pulling up a chair, he sat down and read the brief account that stated that late yesterday evening, the police, acting on information, had gone to Hetterling Cove, a well-known picnic spot, and had found the body of a man buried in a sand dune. Apparently the man had died of a heart attack, but there was evidence that he had been brutally tortured before he died.

The account went on: *It is believed the dead man was a criminal known as Baldy*

Riccard. Anyone who saw this man between May 10 and 11th is asked to communicate with Police Headquarters. Paradise City 00099.

Harry looked up at Randy who stared at him with sick, scared eyes. There was a long pause, then Harry took out his pack of Camels and offered it.

Randy shook his head.

‘Do you think they can pin it on us, Harry?’

Harry lit a cigarette.

‘Not unless we’re unlucky. They haven’t found the Mustang. If they do, then maybe we can start sweating.’

‘Do you think anyone saw us with the Mustang?’

‘There’s always that chance.’ Harry brooded for a long moment.

‘How could they have found him?’ he said as if talking to himself.

He got to his feet. 'Take it easy, Randy. Right now, we do nothing. We sit tight. Now come on, we'd better get back to work.'

'I'm getting out of here,' Randy said. His eyes showed his panic. 'I'll make for Los Angeles. I have a cousin there.'

'What good will that do you?' Harry said, scarcely controlling his impatience. 'If the police want you, they will find you. You can't hide from them forever. Use your head. Can't you see our best bet is to bluff it out? So okay, someone tells the police they think they saw us with the Mustang: a tall guy with a rucksack and a little guy with long hair who was carrying a guitar. Now think . . . how many tall guys with rucksacks and little guys with long hair and guitars have you seen on the highway on your way down here? Dozens? Hundreds? So if we are unlucky and the police come here and ask questions, we know nothing about anything. We came down here on the thumb. We know nothing about a Mustang, and we know nothing about Baldy Riccard. They can't pin anything on us unless one or both of us cracks.' He stared steadily at Randy. 'I'm not cracking . . . so that leaves you.'

Randy licked his dry lips.

'It's fine for you. You're in the clear, but I'm a draft dodger.'

'So what? So you get picked up for dodging the draft and that's just your hard luck, but it's nothing. You get picked up on a murder rap that sticks . . . that's something. Right?'

Randy thought about this for a long, uneasy moment, then he nodded.

'Yes . . . I guess that's right.'

'Come on, then; stop looking as if the end of the world's arrived. Let's get back to work.' Harry paused to fold the newspaper and drop it into the trash basket, then he walked into the hot sunshine.

Reluctantly, Randy followed him. They walked along the path until they reached the bar entrance, then Harry suddenly put his hand on Randy's arm and pulled him back into the shade as he saw the white Mercedes come into the car park.

A squat, heavily built man was at the wheel: his round, fat face was swarthy and suntanned, his small eyes, black and glittering, his mouth thin. He wore a panama hat pulled down low on his face and a bottle green shabby suit. Mrs. Carlos, her face half hidden behind her sun goggles, was in the passenger seat.

The squat man stopped the car, got out, ran around the car and opened the offside door. Mrs. Carlos got out. She had on a white mother hubbard and sandals. The squat man handed her a beach bag, took off his hat, bowed, got back into the Mercedes and drove away.

Mrs. Carlos made her way down to the beach.

'Who's the fat man?' Harry asked.

‘Fernando, her chauffeur,’ Randy told him.

‘Ever seen him drive a green and white Chevy?’

Randy stared at him.

‘That’s his own car. He drives it sometimes when he has messages for Mrs. Carlos. What’s with the questions?’

Harry was remembering the green and white Chevrolet which had followed him from the airport after he had collected Baldy Riccard’s suitcase. He was pretty sure this man, Fernando, had been the driver.

‘What do you know about him, Randy? It’s important.’

‘Not much. He’s been working for Carlos for a couple of years. He’s a pal of Solo. When he is off duty, he comes here in the evening and Solo and he play cards. What’s it all about?’

‘That’s what I’d like to know,’ Harry said, his mind busy. ‘Okay, Randy, take it easy . . . see you,’ and leaving him, he headed for the beach.

He passed near Nina who was sitting in the sun checking through the previous night’s restaurant receipts. She glanced up, but Harry didn’t look at her. Out of the corner of his eye, he had seen Manuel on the veranda, watching him. He purposely passed close to Mrs. Carlos who, seeing him, called to him.

‘Hi, Harry.’

Harry approached her. She was lying on a mattress, under the shade of the umbrella and she looked up at him through her sun goggles.

‘What’s going on over there?’ She waved to the coral reef. ‘Foundations of some sort?’

‘That’s right. We’re putting up a high dive board. Solo thought it was time we had one.’ Harry was aware her eyes were going over his powerfully built body.

He, in turn, was looking down at her, imagining her again as she got out of the Mustang, hidden behind the anti-dazzle goggles, the white scarf concealing her hair and tucked into a black cotton shirt. Again he wondered how a woman like her with her money and background could have become involved with a man like Riccard.

She was saying something which he missed.

‘I’m sorry, Mrs. Carlos . . . what was that?’

‘I said I hear you are a great diver. Solo tells me you won a medal.’

‘Oh, sure.’

Again she studied him.

‘When will the diving board be finished?’

‘Less than a couple of weeks.’

‘Are you staying here long, Harry?’

‘Two months. I have a job waiting for me in New York.’

‘What kind of a job?’

‘A job, Mrs. Carlos.’

She smiled.

‘No business of mine?’

Harry didn’t say anything. He looked from her to where three teenagers were playing with a medicine ball.

‘I asked because I wondered if you would like to stay down here, Harry.’

He looked at her again.

‘What was that, Mrs. Carlos?’

Her smile became a little fixed.

‘I wish you would pay attention. How would you like to be my chauffeur?’

‘You already have a chauffeur, Mrs. Carlos.’

‘He’s not staying . . . I’m getting rid of him. It’s an easy job. You will have to look after two cars . . . drive me to the beach and collect me, take me out at night when my husband is busy. There’s a two-room apartment and \$150 a week. Would you like it?’

‘I have two months here, Mrs. Carlos. I can’t let Solo down.’

‘I’m not asking you to let him down!’ There was now a waspish note in her voice. ‘I’m asking you if you would like the job. I can wait. I can get rid of Fernando any time. Do you want it?’

‘It sounds fine, Mrs. Carlos. Could I think about it?’

Again he felt her quizzing him from behind her sun goggles.

‘To help you make up your mind, come out tomorrow afternoon.’ She smiled up at him. ‘My husband will be in Miami, but that needn’t stop you. You know where we live?’

‘Yes, I know. I’m sorry, I have a date tomorrow. Perhaps next Sunday?’

He watched the muscles in her throat contract and her mouth turn ugly.

‘I said tomorrow afternoon, Harry!’

‘I said I was sorry. I have a date tomorrow afternoon.’

Her hands turned into fists.

‘Do I have to spell it out, you stupid slob?’ she said in a low, vicious tone. ‘I want you at my place tomorrow afternoon! You will be well paid . . . \$300! Don’t tell me other women haven’t paid you stud fees before!’

Harry regarded her, then looked across the sand to the sea.

‘Seems one of those kids could be getting into difficulties,’ he said. ‘Excuse me, Mrs. Carlos.’

He walked towards the teenagers, one of them was in the sea and enjoying herself.

There was an ominous silence as Lepski walked into Chief of Police Terrell's office, Terrell sat at his desk. Seated on his right was Sergeant Beigler.

Standing by the window, his face wearing a heavy frown was Sergeant Hess.

The three men regarded Lepski with deadpan cop stares as he came in. He paused to close the door as if it were made of eggshells, then he moved to Terrell's desk and stood waiting.

There was a long pause, then Terrell said, 'What the hell do you imagine you're playing at? I've had a complaint from Lieutenant Lacey. He's sending in a report about you. If half what he says is right, you're in dead trouble.'

Lepski was prepared for this broadside and had already formulated his plan of campaign. Although sweat beads were showing on his forehead, he met Terrell's wrathful eyes without flinching.

'Chief, I know I did wrong,' he said. 'I know I was off our territory, but when Lacey said we were the worst bunch of cops on the coast, I couldn't take it. So I wouldn't cooperate, so he got mad. so he's reporting me.'

Lepski was relieved to see Terrell, Beigler and Hess stiffen and blood rush into their faces.

'The worst bunch of cops on the coast!' Beigler snarled. 'Did that deadbeat, hunkhead say that?'

'That's what he said,' Lepski returned, his face registering injured outrage.

'The punk!' Hess exploded. 'He calls himself a detective! Him! He couldn't find himself in a toilet!'

'All right,' Terrell said curtly. 'Anyone is entitled to his own opinion. If Lieutenant Lacey thinks we are the worst cops on the coast, that doesn't mean he is right.' He regarded Lepski suspiciously. 'What made him say that, Tom?'

Lepski relaxed a little. He felt confident now that he had played the right card, but everything depended how he played his next card.

'I know I was out of turn,' he said. 'You told me to find Mai Langley. I had a hunch she might be somewhere at Vero Beach where Baldy pulled this job. I happen to have a contact there. I know it's off our territory, but if I had checked with Lacey, he would have taken over and then there would have been a foul-up. So I thought the quickest way to find Mai was to contact my contact. If she had come across, I would have reported to you, Chief, and then maybe you would have reported to Lacey and then maybe, after three or four days, he might have contacted Mai. As it worked out, my contact told

me Mai was right in the building. I decided there could be no harm walking up a flight of stairs and having a word with her before I reported to you. While I was talking to her, a gunman burst in and knocked her off.' Lepski made his face sad. 'It's my tough luck, Chief, but that's the way it happened.'

Terrell looked at Beigler who grinned.

'Wonderful,' Beigler said with grudging admiration. 'This guy could talk himself out of a coffin.'

'All right, Tom,' Terrell said. 'Go ahead. So what happened?'

Lepski drew in a long, deep breath. He was sure now he had taken the poison out of Lacey's report. He told the three men what had happened and of his interview with Goldie White. While they listened Beigler took notes. When Lepski had finished, Terrell said, 'A good job, but done badly. If ever you stray into Miami's territory again without permission, I'll throw you to the wolves. Remember that. This time, I'll take care of Lacey.'

'Thanks, Chief.' Feeling the atmosphere was now on a friendly basis, he went on, 'Isn't there any coffee in this headquarters?'

Beigler stiffened.

'Where's Charley?' He grabbed the telephone receiver. 'Charley! Send one of your hunkheads out for four coffees. What's going on down there?' He listened, grunted and hung up. 'Coffees coming up.'

Lepski pulled up a chair and sat astride it.

'Chief, there's another thing,' he said. 'I have a hunch I know who the guy is who tortured Baldy.'

'For Pete's sake!' Hess exploded. 'Why didn't you say so before?'

'All right, Fred,' Terrell said. 'Let Tom tell it his own way. So you have a hunch?'

'That's right.' Lepski scowled at Hess who glared back at him, then went on, 'Solo Dominico has hired a lifeguard for a couple of months. I ran into Solo and this new guy when I was at the market checking on those dips you were worried about. So okay, I met this guy: an ex-sergeant, paratrooper, a guy called Harry Mitchell. He's just back from Vietnam and on a vacation before taking a job in New York. A couple of days ago I was at the airport, trying to get a line on Baldy when I ran into Mitchell, carrying a white plastic suitcase with a red band around it.'

A patrolman came in with four cartons of coffee which he placed on the desk then left.

'So what's all the excitement about the suitcase?' Hess demanded impatiently as he reached for a carton.

Lepski wasn't to be hurried. He was sure if he handled this right, he must get his promotion.

'When I talked to Mai Langley,' he went on, ignoring Hess, 'just

before this gunman bust in, she told me Baldy had taken his suitcase to the airport.' He paused, then went on, speaking slowly and deliberately. 'This suitcase was white plastic with a red band around it!'

He sat back, reached for his carton of coffee and sipped, his eyes going first to Terrell, then to Beigler and finally to Hess.

'You've made a point, Tom,' Terrell said. 'So . . . go on.'

Disappointed there had been no greater reaction, Lepski said, 'I asked Mitchell if it was his suitcase. He said it was: that he had left it at the airport, but now he was working steadily for Dominico, he needed it. So I checked his discharge papers and when I saw he was a Vietnam veteran, a sergeant paratrooper, I let him go with the suitcase.'

'You mean you didn't look in the suitcase?' Hess demanded.

'Now, Fred, you know Tom had no right to look in the suitcase,' Terrell said before Lepski could explode. 'The point is: is a white plastic suitcase with a red band around it unique? What do you think, Joe?'

'It could well be. I think Tom has something. Solo has been hooked up with Baldy in the past. Baldy owned a white plastic case with a red band and left it at the airport. Mitchell, who is working for Solo, collects a white plastic suitcase with a red sash. Yeah . . . of course Tom's onto something.'

Lepski beamed, shifting forward, nearly overturning his chair.

'I know it! Look, Chief, suppose I go out to Solo's joint and twist Mitchell's arm? He could spill the whole setup.'

Terrell relit his pipe which had gone out. He thought for some moments, then shook his head.

'No . . . I want something to go on first.' He turned to Hess. 'Let's get some dope about Mitchell. Telex Washington.'

Hess poked a fat finger in Lepski's direction.

'You read his discharge papers . . . give me the dope.'

Lepski flexed his brain muscles. He had only taken a brief look at Harry Mitchell's papers, but he had a good memory. After a moment's pause, he said, 'Harry Mitchell. Top Sergeant. Third Paratroop Regiment. First Company.'

Hess regarded him with grudging approval.

'One of these days . . . maybe ten years from now, Lepski . . . you could make a good detective.'

Seeing Lepski's face turn purple, Terrell said curtly, 'Cut it out, Fred. Send that Telex!'

When Hess had left the office, Terrell went on, 'You are doing all right, Tom. Just don't lean on it too hard. Suppose you see what you can find out about these two queers: Hans Larsen and Jacey Smith. If

it goes out of our territory, tell me before you do anything.'

'Yes, Chief.' Lepski started towards the door, then paused. 'You really mean you think I'm doing all right?'

'You heard what the Chief said,' Beigler barked. 'Get moving!'

Lepski left the office, skidded around Max Jacoby as he was about to enter the office and then made for his desk.

Terrell looked at Jacoby as he hovered in the doorway.

'What is it, Max?'

'Retnick's just called in. Chief. He's been checking Highway 1. He says he has a description of two men driving a Mustang that matches Baldy's Mustang. He says the car was towing a caravan.'

Terrell and Beigler exchanged glances, 'A caravan?'

'That's what he says.'

'Tell him to come in pronto.'

'He's on his way, Chief.'

When Jacoby had returned to his desk, Terrell said to Beigler, 'What do you think of it now, Joe?'

'It's taking shape. We've found Baldy. We've found the Mustang. Now a caravan turns up. We were wondering how Baldy's body got to Hetterling Cove. Could be the body went in the caravan . . . so I guess we start looking for the caravan.'

'I go along with that.' Terrell looked down at the notes Beigler had taken of Lepski's verbal report. 'But all this . . .' He knocked out his pipe and began to refill it. 'This still could be a C.I.A. thing, Joe. Maybe I should report it.'

'Still working on the Castro angle?'

Terrell lit his pipe.

'Yes. Look at the information we now have. To me, the clue to all this is that Baldy was a Communist with an admiration for Castro. On March 24th, he arrives at Vero Beach and hires a launch, plus two men, from Jack Thomas. His destination is Havana if we can believe what Goldie White told Lepski. It looks as if Baldy was on a smuggling deal and this had to do with

Castro. According to his girlfriend his boat was intercepted and sunk. Then two months later, Baldy appears again and tries to hire a boat from Dominico, failing this, he goes to O'Brien to raise money, failing this, he gets his girlfriend to drive him to Vero Beach. When he has settled her with Do-Do Hammerstein, he returns here, puts his suitcase in a left luggage locker at the airport, then returns to Vero Beach where he hires a Hertz Mustang under the name of Joel Blach. Then, suddenly he vanishes and the rumour goes around that he has been knocked off.

Two days later we find the Mustang which leads us to Baldy's grave. A man answering to the description of a lifeguard hired by

Dominico is seen by Lepski at the airport with a suitcase resembling Baldy's case.' Terrell puffed at his pipe, frowning. 'We are making progress, but we still don't know what Baldy was smuggling nor do we know who killed him. We have a lot of digging to do yet, but it becomes more and more obvious to me that Baldy was in some smuggling racket to do with Cuba and this makes me wonder if I shouldn't turn the whole thing over to the C.I.A. They might do a faster and better job than we are doing.'

'You said a couple of days, Chief,' Beigler said. We still have a day and a quarter.'

Terrell hesitated.

'Yes . . . well, okay, Joe. Get back to your desk, I'll do some more thinking.'

Half an hour later, Detective 3rd Grade Red Retnick, a tall, beefy young man with flaming red hair came into the Detectives' room.

Seeing him, Beigler waved him to Terrell's office, got up and went to the head of the stairs and bawled down to Charley Tanner to send up coffee, then he joined Retnick in the office. Retnick made a concise report which Beigler took down in fast shorthand.

'On Thursday night, two men in a Mustang, towing a caravan, stopped at Jackson's All-Night Cafe for coffee,' Retnick said. 'A trucker who had been in the cafe and who was there again on his return journey while I was making inquiries, gave me a description of these two men.'

'Hold it a moment, Red,' Terrell said. To Beigler, he went on, 'Get Lepski.'

Beigler looked into the Detectives' room and yelled to Lepski who was typing his report. When Lepski came into the office, Terrell told Retnick to go on.

'The elder of the two men was over six foot in height, powerfully built, blond, blue eyes and a broken nose of a fighter. He was wearing khaki drill trousers and matching shirt.'

'That's Harry Mitchell,' Lepski said. 'No doubt about it!'

'Go on, Red,' Terrell said, relighting his pipe.

'The other man was younger: slightly built, long black hair down to his shoulders, thin face.'

'Mean anything to you?' Terrell asked looking at Lepski.

Lepski shook his head.

'Doesn't ring a bell.' Then he screwed up his eyes and snapped his fingers. Wait a minute! That could be Solo's barman. He turns up when the season opens. I saw him there last year. The description fits him. Randy . . . something . . . Broach? Something like that. Look, Chief, suppose I go to the restaurant tonight? Solo invited my wife and me for a free meal. It would be an excuse to look around.'

Terrell thought for a moment, then nodded.

‘Yes, but understand, Tom, you play it close to your chest. We don’t make any move until I get some facts about Mitchell . . . understand?’ He looked at Beigler. ‘Anything from Washington yet?’

Beigler shook his head.

‘You’re forgetting the time lag. We can’t hope to hear from Washington for some hours.’

‘So while we wait. I want that caravan found and I want it found fast,’ Terrell said.

* * *

Lepski was having an argument with his wife. This was nothing new. They had been married for three years, and on Lepski’s reckoning, they had a major argument twice a day. He had jotted down figures and had come up with the result of 2,190 arguments of which, he had decided bitterly, he might have won 180 of them.

He had returned home unexpectedly at 18.00. Unexpectedly because his usual time for coming home was around 21.00. He found his wife, Carroll, preparing goulash for his dinner.

Carroll Lepski, aged twenty-six, tall, dark and pretty was a young woman with a mind and a will of her own. Before she married, she was a clerk at the American Express Company, dealing with the rich, arranging their travel schedules and advising them. The work had made her confident and somewhat bossy.

Having dealt with hundreds of irritable know-alls, she had learned that argument if carried on with logic and if persisted in generally won the day. Although Carroll was well equipped to deal with the problems of modern day life, she was a messy, but determined cook. Whenever she prepared a meal, apart from a sandwich or a heated up hamburger, her kitchen turned into a chaotic battlefield. Invariably, she used four pans when one could do; invariably she let the milk boil over; invariably she dropped some, if not all of the meal she was preparing on the floor and which she scooped up to return to the pan and then not waiting to wipe up the mess slid about on the remains with the agility of an ice skater. But Carroll had a lot of character and determination. Once she had made up her mind that Lepski was to have goulash for his dinner, then come hell or high water, he would have it.

Lepski found her not looking her best and struggling with the contents of a pot of cream that had overturned and had made a big puddle on the floor. It was a hot evening, the kitchen was hot and Carroll was hot and fussed.

So when he broke the news that he was taking her out to dinner

and 'For God's sake, honey, get cleaned up. We're going to a swank joint,' she was in two minds whether to carry on with the goulash or to say to hell with the mess and try to be happy. It was so rare that Lepski had time to take her anywhere that the unexpected invitation turned her sour when it should have made her glad.

'Why couldn't you have told me this morning?' she demanded pushing back a strand of dark hair that was falling over her left eye 'We're having goulash for dinner.'

Lepski pranced from one foot to the other in his impatience.

'Never mind the goulash. We're going out, and for Pete's sake, don't start an argument.'

This was a fatal remark which Lepski realised as soon as he had made it. Carroll stiffened and drew herself up.

'Are you saying it is me who starts the arguments?' she demanded.

Realising that he was now out on thin ice, Lepski gave her a false smile.

'I said nothing of the sort. Start an argument? Now, listen, honey. . .'

'You said, Don't start an argument.'

Lepski tried to look amazed.

'I said that? Forget it. It was a joke. Now, tonight . . .'

'Your idea of a joke and mine are very different.'

Lepski ran his fingers through his hair. He took two quick steps to his left, then two to his right, then feeling relieved, he said, 'Okay . . . no joke. Forget it, darling. We're going to the Dominico restaurant which is the third best restaurant in this City. Marvellous food . . . sea . . . beach . . . soft music . . . soft lights . . . the works!'

Carroll's eyes turned suspicious.

'Why are we going?' she demanded. 'Have you done something you shouldn't? Is this a softening-up process?'

Lepski inserted his finger in his collar and dragged at it.

'We've been invited,' he said, his voice rising. 'The owner of the goddamn restaurant likes me. He said for me to bring my god . . . my wife . . . so we're going. It's all free.'

'Do you have to swear like that, Lepski?'

Lepski remained very still. He was a little alarmed at the way his pulse was beating. Finally, he said, 'Forget it, honey. We're invited . . . so let's go.'

Carroll regarded him.

'This man has invited us?'

Lepski nodded dumbly.

'What's he done then?'

Lepski walked around the kitchen. A soft humming sound came

from him like a bee that has lost its hive.

‘He’s done nothing. He just happens to like me,’ he said when he could speak.

‘Why?’

‘How the hell do I know? He’s invited us for God’s sake! Do we have to get on a couch together to find out why?’

‘I wish you wouldn’t shout, Lepski,’ Carroll said severely. ‘I’m sure he is a crook and wants something out of you.’

‘Fine . . . okay . . . so he’s a crook and wants something out of me! Who cares? We get a free dinner!’ Lepski waved his hand violently. His hand came into contact with the lid of a saucepan, burning him. His language was so lurid Carroll put her hands over her ears.

‘Lepski! Sometimes I’m really ashamed of you!’

Lepski sucked his fingers.

‘So will you get ready?’ he snarled. ‘Have I any clean shirts?’

She stared at him.

‘How many shirts are you going to wear tonight then?’

Lepski closed his eyes for a brief moment.

‘I mean is there one goddamn clean shirt I can put on?’

‘Of course there is. Why don’t you look? What shall I wear?’

This question always drove Lepski crazy. Carroll always asked him and invariably it ended in an argument that went on for hours.

‘Anything . . . you know just look your lovely self. Shouldn’t you turn off the stove or something?’

An hour later, Lepski was sitting on the small patio, a cigarette burning between his fingers, containing his impatience with an effort that raised his blood pressure alarmingly.

Although married for three years, he still couldn’t get used to his wife’s method of dressing for an evening out. First she would go to her closet and take out her entire collection of clothes which she laid on the bed. Then she held a post mortem on each garment, telling Lepski, who was trapped in the room, that she was ashamed to be seen in any of them and he should be ashamed of being 2nd Grade Detective when he could easily be a Sergeant and draw Sergeant’s pay.

Lepski had been inflicted with this routine so often he let it go in one ear and out the other, but although he was dead to the monologue, he was aware that time was passing. Finally, having cunningly suggested she should wear a smart black dress, saying she would look a knockout in it and being told (as he knew he would be told) that he must be crazy to imagine she would go to a beach restaurant in a black dress, she selected a white and red number which he had wanted her to wear anyway, but knew if he had suggested it, it would cause yet another argument.

He had finally escaped from the bedroom, made himself a double

whisky and soda and was now waiting while she completed her dressing.

A little after 19.15 she appeared on the terrace and Lepski regarded her. She looked so nice, so immaculate and so pretty that he started to his feet with that well-known gleam in his eyes that wives quickly recognise.

‘Don’t be disgusting!’ she said sharply. ‘Lepski! Don’t you dare touch me!’

Lepski realised this wasn’t the time so he leered at her.

‘Mrs. Lepski, we have a date when we get home,’ he said. ‘The poet who said something stirred in the forest must have been thinking of you.’

Carroll stifled a giggle, then looked severe.

‘Don’t be so coarse. Well . . . do I look all right?’

‘Marvellous, gorgeous, scrumptious! Let’s go!’

As he started towards the car, Carroll said, ‘Wait a moment!’

Lepski paused and began humming under his breath. He regarded her, forced a smile, then asked with heavy sarcasm, ‘What is it now? A ladder in your stocking? Have you bust a strap? Forgotten your handbag? No handkerchief? Got your girdle twisted? What is it this time?’

‘Don’t be so ridiculous. I’m looking at you. You’re not going out with me looking like that!’

Lepski gaped at her.

‘Me? What’s the matter with me? Clean shirt . . . pants pressed . . . beautifully shaved. Let me tell you, Mrs. Lepski, there’s not a girl in this City who wouldn’t be proud to be seen with me.’

‘If you imagine I’m going out with you when you are carrying a gun, you’re mistaken! Anyone who isn’t blind can see that awful holster through your coat. Do you imagine I want to be mistaken for a cop’s wife?’

Lepski ran his hand over his face. ‘But aren’t you a cop’s wife?’ he asked, his voice a little shrill.

‘There’s no need to advertise the fact. Lepski, park that gun!’

Lepski loosened his tie, made a noise like a bee in a bottle, longed to put his foot through the TV screen, and only with a tremendous effort, restrained himself from tearing at his hair.

‘Listen, honey, it’s regulations,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I have to wear a gun. Pretend to be blind! Even pretend I’m a cop! Let’s go!’

‘I’m not going to a high-class restaurant with you if you are wearing that gun!’

He recognised from the tone of her voice that this was final.

He knew the argument could last for the next two hours and still get him nowhere. He was hungry for a good, free meal, so he took off

the holster and threw the gun and the holster with some violence on the settee.

‘There’s no need to show off,’ Carroll said quietly. ‘I don’t mind a little temper . . . that is manly, but please don’t be childish.’

Lepski made a noise like a distracted goat.

‘Do we go or don’t we?’ he snarled.

Carroll regarded him with astonishment.

‘I’m ready and waiting. I’m not holding us up, it’s you.’

With the veins in his neck like steel cables taking a strain, Lepski stamped towards his car.

* * *

On Saturday night, a big crowd always descended on the Dominico restaurant, and this night was no exception. The staff was at full stretch. Solo had asked Harry to help in the bar. Nina had dropped her usual role of circulating and charming the businessmen. She too was ferrying drinks and taking orders.

Manuel moved quickly around the restaurant, conducting people, settling them, leaving them with menus, before darting back to the entrance where other people were waiting impatiently to be taken to their tables. As he arrived at the entrance for the fifteenth time, he pulled up short as if he had walked into a brick wall.

The sight of Tom Lepski with a tall, dark girl Manuel recognized as Lepski’s wife came as a shock and an unpleasant surprise.

‘Mr. Lepski!’ He showed his teeth in a wide, false smile. ‘This is indeed my pleasure!’

‘Solo said for us to come . . . so here we are,’ Lepski said, a little nonplussed to find so many people arriving.

‘Of course.’ Manuel always kept three tables in reserve for just such an emergency. ‘Delighted . . . this way, please.’ He escorted them to a corner table, settled them, snapped his fingers at his assistant, showed his teeth and raced back to the entrance.

As soon as the crowd began to slacken, Manuel rushed to the kitchen to warn Solo that Lepski had arrived. Working under pressure, Solo grimaced, then waved Manuel away.

‘Let him have everything the best all on the house.’

As Manuel returned to the restaurant he saw Harry coming from the bar, carrying a tray of drinks.

‘Number four table, in the corner,’ Manuel said. ‘Get their drink order . . . it’s on the house.’

It wasn’t until Harry reached the table that he realised who he was about to serve.

‘Hello, Mitchell,’ Lepski said, giving Harry his cop stare.

‘Remember me?’

‘Mr. Lepski,’ Harry said, his face wooden.

‘That’s right. How are you making out here?’

Harry stared at him for a brief moment, then turned to Carroll.

‘What would you like to drink?’

Carroll felt a slight stirring of her blood. She thought this tall, powerfully built man was just the sexiest looking male she had ever seen.

‘Could I have a Tom Collins, please?’ she asked with a smile. Lepski hadn’t seen since they were married.

‘I’ll have a double Scotch on the rocks,’ he snapped, glaring at Carroll.

‘Isn’t that excessive, Tom?’ Carroll asked, aware that she had prodded alive a jealousy she had thought long since dead. ‘After all, you were drinking before we left home.’ She looked up at Harry. ‘Please bring my husband a small Scotch with plenty of Whiterock.’

Harry went away.

‘Look, honey, I know my goddamn capacity,’ Lepski said heatedly. ‘Would you please . . .’

‘I just don’t want you to get drunk.’

Lepski made a hissing noise that would have frightened a snake.

‘You stay sober if you want to, I’m going to please myself!’

While they were arguing, Harry, in the bar, told Randy that Lepski was in the restaurant. Randy nearly dropped the cocktail shaker he was manipulating.

‘What’s he doing here?’ he asked breathlessly.

‘Getting a free meal and probably taking a look around. Relax, Randy. A Tom Collins: double gin, and a double Scotch on the rocks.’

Randy made the drinks.

‘He saw you with Baldy’s suitcase, Harry,’ he said as he placed the drinks on Harry’s tray. ‘Do you think . . .?’

‘Take it easy. He can’t prove anything. He has no witnesses.’

Harry picked up the tray. ‘Give yourself a drink.’ He left the bar.

As he reached Lepski’s table, Manuel was taking the order.

Harry placed the drinks. Seeing what he had been given, Lepski looked up at Harry and winked.

Manuel was being expansive.

‘Solo would like you to try his speciality, Mrs. Lepski,’ he said, leaning over Carroll and showing her his teeth. ‘Casserole of duck with green peppers. I suggest fried oysters on shrimp toast to begin. How does that sound?’

Carroll was entranced.

‘Don’t tell me . . . just bring it to me,’ she said.

Manuel looked at Lepski.

'Would that be okay for you too, Mr. Lepski?'

'I'll have a steak.'

Carroll gave an exasperated sigh.

'Oh, Tom, for goodness sake! Can't you eat anything but steaks? This casserole . . .'

'I'll have a steak,' Lepski said firmly. 'Can't a man eat what he wants for God's sake?'

'Well, if you want a steak . . . have a steak!'

An hour and twenty minutes later, the meal finished, Lepski felt a twinge of conscience. While they were waiting for their coffee he decided it was time he went to work, but he knew it would be fatal to tell Carroll they were here on police business.

'Honey, I'm taking a pee,' he said, pushing back his chair.

'Lepski! Must you be so coarse? Can't you say you are going to the toilet?' Carroll demanded, outraged.

Lepski looked wonderingly at her.

'That's where I said I was going. You sit still. Anything you want, ask the spic.' He got to his feet, and before Carroll realised there was more to this than a visit to the Men's Room, he made his way quickly from the restaurant and out onto the cement path that led to the kitchen.

Seeing him go, Manuel pressed a button which started a buzzer in the kitchen, warning Solo there could be trouble. Solo was in the middle of serving four specials and he cursed.

As Lepski moved into the night air and walked past the kitchen, he looked through the window, seeing that Solo was busy at the cooking range. He heard a car arrive and looking towards the car park, saw a white Mercedes pull up under one of the tall standard lights.

The car attracted Lepski's attention. He paused to watch a woman get out of the car. He recognised her as Mrs. Carlos, the wife of one of the richest men in Paradise City. But he scarcely looked at her. His attention became riveted on the squat, heavily built man who held the car door open for her as she got out.

Lepski worked on hunches. As soon as he saw this man, he became positive from his build that he was the man who had killed Mai Langley. He slid his hand inside his jacket for his gun, then remembered, because of Carroll's snobbery, his gun was lying on the settee in his living room. Sweat started out under his arms. This man who was now leaning his fat body against the car and lighting a cigarette, could be a killer. Lepski had two choices: either to telephone headquarters and ask for help: in which case he would have to admit he was unarmed and why, or he could take a chance and tackle this possible gunman and hope there would be no gunplay.

He shifted from one foot to the other in an agony of indecision.

He was sure if he balled up this situation, his promotion would go down the drain. It didn't occur to him that all he had to do was to return to the restaurant, sit down with Carroll and continue to enjoy his evening. Lepski had come up from a patrolman and during the years, he had absorbed into his system the police code. He hesitated for only a few seconds, then he walked out of the shadows, crossed the car park and arrived by the Mercedes.

The squat man looked at him and stiffened. His right hand went casually to the middle button of his tight fitting coat and released the button so the jacket swung open. That told Lepski the man was carrying a gun.

Lepski regarded the man, imagining how he would look with a handkerchief masking his face, and became even more convinced he was the killer.

'Police,' he said in his cop voice. 'Who are you?'

Under the glaring light, Lepski saw the man's eyes shift and glitter.

'I don't understand,' the man said. 'I am Mrs. Carlos's chauffeur.'

'What's your name?' Lepski asked and he moved forward slightly. If he could slam a punch at this spic, he thought, he could get his gun, but the man edged away.

'I don't understand,' he repeated. 'I am Fernando Cortez. I work for Mrs. Carlos.'

'Okay, Cortez,' Lepski said, aware his heart was thumping. 'Get your hands up! Come on . . . up!'

That bluff, he thought sadly, wouldn't convince a child. It certainly didn't convince Cortez. He remained still, staring at Lepski.

'I don't understand. I am Mrs. Carlos's chauffeur.'

'I heard you the first time. I want your gun!'

Cortez hesitated.

'I carry a gun for Mrs. Carlos's protection.'

'I want it.' Lepski held out his hand which was steady, but he was sweating hard.

Cortez hesitated again, then stepped back.

'Okay, copper, so you can have it!' he snarled. The gun jumped into his hand and aimed directly at Lepski. In the brief second that Lepski stared at the gun, he recognized it as a Walther 7.65: the same type of gun that had killed Mai Langley.

He was bracing himself for gunfire when a vivid white light exploded inside his skull as a vicious blow slammed down on his head.

Chapter Eight

Her coffee finished, Carroll Lepski was looking impatiently at her watch when she saw Manuel, the Captain of Waiters, weaving his way around the tables and heading towards her. He arrived at her table and gave her that sad smile people wear when about to break bad news.

‘Excuse me, Mrs. Lepski,’ he said, leaning over her, his voice low and confidential. ‘Your husband is in a little trouble. Don’t be alarmed. It happens now and then, although it’s the first time in this restaurant.’

Carroll’s eyes opened wide.

‘Trouble? What do you mean? Is he hurt?’

‘No . . . no . . . no . . . certainly not. He’s just passed out. Maybe the heat . . . maybe a little too much Scotch.’

Carroll started to her feet.

‘Are you telling me my husband is drunk?’

‘Well, you could say that.’ Seeing Carroll’s eyes light up with anger, Manuel felt it safe to look superior. ‘I always say, Mrs. Lepski, some can take it . . . some can’t.’

Blood rushed into Carroll’s face. She felt humiliated and furious.

‘Where is he?’

‘We’ve put him in his car, Mrs. Lepski. He’ll be fine by tomorrow morning. We’re sending someone with you. You’ll need help getting him to bed.’ Manuel showed her his teeth in a sympathetic smile. ‘Think nothing of it, Mrs. Lepski. These things happen . . . so sorry.’

Carroll snatched up her bag and walked towards the exit, sure everyone in the restaurant was looking at her. By the time she got into the hot night air, she was in such a rage she was practically breathless.

Manuel trotted behind her.

‘To your right, Mrs. Lepski,’ he said.

Carroll stamped across the car park to where she could see Lepski’s Wildcat in the shadows. By the car stood the handsome man Lepski had spoken to and had called Mitchell. He stood back as she reached the car. She peered into the back seat where her husband sat, his head resting on the back of the seat, his eyes closed. Through the open car window came a strong smell of whisky.

Carroll hesitated: a little alarmed. She had never seen her husband like this. How could he have got so drunk in such a short time?

‘Now don’t worry, Mrs. Lepski,’ Manuel said soothingly. ‘This

happens all the time. Harry will drive after you and help you when you get home.'

'Are you sure he's all right?' Carroll asked, a quaver in her voice.

'He's fine. A little headache perhaps tomorrow morning, but otherwise . . . fine.' Manuel shifted impatiently. Why the hell didn't she get in the car and take off? He had a restaurant full of people needing his attention.

Suddenly, from the car, came a loud, strangled snore. To Carroll, this revolting sound was like a spark in a gunpowder factory. She got in the car, slammed the door and gunned the engine. As she began to drive out of the parking lot, Manuel signaled to Harry who got in Solo's estate car and went after her.

Harry was puzzled. He had been serving drinks when Manuel had told him Solo wanted him. He had found Solo kneeling beside Lepski's unconscious body.

'Look at this!' Solo had said, his voice despairing. 'I tell him it's all on the house and he disgraces my restaurant. Swell! He must have swam in the stuff.'

Harry bent over the prone body. The stink of whisky made him wrinkle his nose.

'Is he all right?'

'All right? He's drunk!' Solo said bitterly. 'Now listen, Harry, his wife is in the restaurant. You take my car and help her . . . hey? Put him to bed. Soothe her. This is very bad for my business. Help me get him into the car.'

While he pondered on all this, the Wildcat ahead of him was tearing along the highway. Harry had trouble in keeping up with it. The brake lights shone red as the Wildcat swung off the highway, raced down a narrow twisting road so fast Harry let it go. If this woman wanted to kill herself, she could do it. He wasn't going to risk his neck on such a road.

He lost sight of the Wildcat for several minutes, then picked up the taillights again on a strip of road leading to a housing estate. The Wildcat skidded to a halt before a two-storey house with a tiny lawn, a patio and a garage.

Harry got out of the estate car as Carroll got out of the Wildcat.

'I can't tell you how ashamed I am!' Carroll said as Harry came up to her.

Harry looked at her. The headlights of the two cars gave enough light for both to see each other.

'Ashamed?' He smiled. 'What's there to be ashamed of?'

'I could kill him!'

Harry went to the Wildcat, took hold of Lepski, dragged him out of the car and hoisted him across his broad shoulders.

Carroll opened the front door and led Harry with his burden into the small hall, up the stairs and into the small bedroom they reserved for their guests.

‘Dump him in there!’ she said, then leaving the room she went down the stairs and into the living room. She turned on the lights and stood for a long moment while she fought down her fury. Okay, she thought, so Lepski gets drunk. Okay, what’s good for him, is good enough for me!

She went to the liquor cabinet, seized a bottle of gin, poured a treble into a glass, added a dash of soda, then shutting her eyes, swallowed the drink in two stomach-heaving gulps. The room reeled around her and she clutched hold of the liquor cabinet, rattling the bottles and the glasses. Then she drew in a long, slow breath and unsteadily, made her way to the settee. She collapsed on it, not sure if she was going to be sick.

By the time Harry had got Lepski into bed and had come down the stairs, Carroll had again visited the liquor cabinet and she was now so drunk she couldn’t stand.

What a beautiful man! she thought, watching Harry as he came into the room. I’m going to bed with him! I’m going to be unfaithful for the first time in my married life! He’s going to tear off all my clothes and I’m going to scream with ecstasy!

‘There’s nothing to worry about, Mrs. Lepski,’ Harry said. ‘Just let him sleep it off.’

‘Worry about him? That’s a laugh! That’s the last thing I’m going to do! Have a drink, Harry . . . can I call you Harry?’

Harry looked at her sharply and realised how drunk she was.

‘Call me anything you like.’

‘Harry . . . I like Harry . . . have a drink.’

‘No, thanks. I have to get back. This is a busy night for us.’

She giggled.

‘Let’s make it a busy night for us . . . you and me. Come here, Harry.’ She lay back on the settee, her dress riding up, her knees spread as she beckoned.

Harry flicked up the light switch, plunging the room into darkness. Then silently, he went into the hall, out into the night and to his car.

Terrified at what she was doing, her body shrinking while she waited for his hands to rip her dress from her, Carroll lay still, her heart hammering, her eyes fast shut.

It was only when she heard his car start up and drive away that she realised he had gone.

From the guest room upstairs came a loud, resonant snore.

Burying her face in a cushion, Carroll burst into tears.

Harry came awake.

He looked through the uncurtained window of his cabin at the grey light of the dawn. He peered at his strap watch. The time was 05.30. Getting out of bed, he walked into the kitchenette and plugged in the coffee percolator. Then he went into the shower room, stripped off and stood under the cold water that brought him awake. He dried himself, shaved, then went into the kitchenette and unplugged the percolator. Carrying a cup of strong black coffee into his bedroom, he set the cup down and dressed. Then he sipped the coffee, checked his watch and saw he still had fifteen minutes before he had to get to the boathouse. He leaned back, the coffee cup in his hand and thought of the previous evening.

He couldn't believe Lepski had been drunk. The obvious solution to the Lepski puzzle was that someone - probably Solo - had sapped Lepski and had knocked him cold. Why had this happened? Harry wondered. When he had left Lepski's residence, he had driven back to the restaurant. Solo had been too busy serving late dinners to talk to him. It wasn't until 01.00 that the restaurant closed and then Solo had gone to bed, still giving Harry no chance of talking to him.

Harry had had a brief moment with Nina before going to his cabin. She had looked at him with burning eyes.

'I'll be at the boathouse at six,' she had said and Harry had nodded.

As he walked towards his cabin, Randy had joined him.

'What's going on?' Randy had asked. 'What happened to Lepski?'

Harry went into Randy's cabin and sat on the bed. He waited until Randy had pulled the curtains and shut the door, then he said, 'You want to know what happened to Lepski. I don't know for sure, but I can make a guess. I think Solo sapped him, poured whisky over him and made out he was drunk. I took him home, put him to bed and soothed his wife.'

Randy's eyes bulged.

'You're kidding! Solo would sap a cop!'

'Your guess is as good as mine,' Harry said quietly. 'That's the way I see it.'

'But why?'

'Maybe Lepski saw something . . . I don't know.' Harry paused and stared at Randy. 'Look, this is the right moment for you to take off.'

Randy gaped.

'What do you mean . . . take off? You said I should stay right here

and bluff it out!’

Harry nodded.

‘Situations change. I know I said that, but now, it’s different. When Lepski surfaces and gets to a telephone, this place is going to be smothered with cops. You won’t stand a chance. Take my tip, Randy, get out now.’

‘So what are you going to do?’

‘Tomorrow morning early I’m going to Sheldon Island with Nina.’

‘With Nina?’ Randy’s voice rose. ‘You crazy?’

‘Randy, this is major league. You are way out of your depth. Pack up and get out,’ Harry said. ‘You’re a nice little guy. I don’t want you to get into trouble. Fade away.’

‘Fade away?’ Randy exclaimed. ‘You told me you could never get away from the cops. Now you’re telling me to fade away. What’s the matter with you? Can’t you talk sense?’

Harry felt in his shirt pocket for his pack of Camels while he stared thoughtfully at Randy.

‘I need some sleep, Randy. Get out of here. Do I have to spell it out? Beat it!’ He stood up and started towards the door. Randy put himself between Harry and the door.

‘Now, wait a minute!’ he said. ‘Just what is all this? You’ve got to tell me! This Baldy thing! You said we could make money out of it!’

‘There’s a chance, Randy, but not for you. You do what I say . . . get out,’ Harry said patiently.

‘You really mean you’re going to Sheldon with Nina?’

‘Yes . . . don’t shout.’

‘I warned you!’ Randy began to shake. ‘Solo will find out and he’ll kill you, Harry! Listen to me! I like you. You saved my life! I owe you something! Don’t go to Sheldon with Nina!’

‘I’m going.’

‘You want to tangle with Solo for God’s sake? He’ll kill you, Harry! He’s mean. It won’t be a fair fight. I know Solo!’

Harry shoved Randy aside, opened the door and stepped out into the darkness. He paused.

‘Get out, Randy, Don’t worry about me.’

Thinking about all this, Harry glanced at his watch. It was time to leave. He knelt by his bed, levered up the floorboard and took from the hole Baldy’s automatic and the box of cartridges. He put them in a beach bag, put in his swim trunks and two packs of cigarettes and then left the cabin.

He wondered if Randy had gone. He looked at Randy’s cabin, seeing the drawn curtains. He didn’t want to be involved with Randy any longer. He had warned him. If he hadn’t gone then it was Randy’s funeral.

He walked quickly down to the boathouse which was screened by shrubs and palm trees.

Nina was there, waiting.

Solo's boat was a twenty-four footer with a cabin aft and powered by twin screws. As soon as Nina saw him coming across the sand, she waved, then swung the engine. As he came aboard, the launch moved from its moorings and began to bounce and bump over the waves as it headed out to sea.

Nina was wearing a bikini. She smiled at him as he joined her in the cockpit.

'Did you have coffee, Harry?'

'Sure.'

She again smiled at him.

'You will love Sheldon. You and I and the birds!' She caught hold of his hand. 'I've been waiting . . . waiting . . . I thought today would never come!'

Harry felt the power of the engines as the boat cut through the sea. He looked towards the cabin.

'Some boat,' he said.

'It's good enough,' Nina looked sharply at him as he began to climb out of the cockpit. 'Where are you going?'

'Taking a look.'

He moved along the deck until he reached the cabin which was big enough to take four berths. Curtains were drawn across the portholes and when he tried the door, he found it was locked. He frowned, stared at the door for some moments, then returned to the cockpit.

'The cabin's all locked.'

'I know. Dad keeps stuff in there. It's always locked. I never use it.'

'What sort of stuff?'

'I don't know . . . stuff.' She smiled, but he saw her eyes had turned hard.

He sat on the bench seat beside her.

'Tell me about Sheldon. Do you go there often?'

'About once a month.'

'I heard someone talking about the island. He said something about the Funnel. Does that mean anything to you?' Harry was being very casual.

'It is a funnel between the rocks. The tide is very tricky around the island. Once every three months the tide drops and you can get through the funnel . . . a passage that leads to a marvelous grotto. The walls are phosphorescent. I've been in there twice. You have to be very careful. The tide can change and then you could be trapped in

there for three months!’

Harry lit a cigarette. He was remembering the note he had found in Baldy’s suitcase.

The Funnel Sheldon. It. 07.45. May 27.

‘When the tide is right, can a boat this size get into the grotto?’

‘Yes. I’ve been in it in this boat. I don’t stay long. Just in and out.’

‘You mean the tide can change that fast?’

‘That’s right. It’s been known to change in an hour. The sea comes in fast. That’s why tourists never visit the grotto.’

‘So we can’t visit it today.’

‘Not by boat.’ She regarded him. ‘Do you want to see it?’

‘Sure . . . when is the tide due to change?’

‘Another week . . . it won’t be next Sunday . . . probably on Wednesday when we’ll be working. But if you really want to see it, we can swim in.’

‘We can?’

She nodded.

‘Have you ever done it?’

‘Oh, no. I couldn’t do it on my own. It’s tricky.’ She put her warm hand on his arm. ‘But with you, I’d be all right. You’re a top class swimmer. Olympic standard.’

‘I can swim. What’s so tricky about it?’

‘There’s a long swim under water and the current is fierce.’ She paused, then went on, ‘There are two aqualungs in that locker.’ She pointed. ‘We could make it if you’d help me.’

Harry looked thoughtful.

‘No . . . better not. Maybe I’ll go on my own, but not with you. I don’t want an accident.’

She made an impatient movement.

‘I want to go! I’m a good swimmer, Harry . . . honest! If we clipped a cord to each other and I got into trouble, you could help me.’

‘You mean it’s that tough?’

‘For heaven’s sake! I thought you were a top swimmer!’

‘I can swim.’ He thought for a moment while she watched him.

‘Well, okay, we can’t come to much grief if we use aqualungs.’

He shifted along the bench seat to the locker she had indicated, opened it and took out the aqualung equipment.

‘Do you want some coffee now, Harry?’

‘Sure.’

He checked the equipment, satisfied himself both lungs were in good order, then turning, accepted the plastic cup of coffee she held out to him.

‘There’s a length of nylon cord somewhere in the locker,’ Nina

said, 'and a couple of belts.'

Harry finished his coffee, turned and hunted in the deep locker. There was a lot of junk wedged in at the back. From this junk he pulled out a plastic bag. Through the plastic he could see a pair of anti-glare driving goggles, a black cotton shirt and a woman's white headscarf.

His broad back was turned to Nina so she couldn't see what he was doing.

'Have you found it Harry?'

He pushed the plastic bag back among the junk. Then he saw the coil of nylon rope. His face expressionless, he turned, holding up the coil.

'This it?'

'Yes. You take the wheel. I'll find the belts.'

'It's okay . . . I've got them.' He pulled two belts fitted with metal loops from the junk.

He was seeing the woman with the Mustang, hidden behind anti-glare goggles, concealing her hair with a white headscarf, tucked into a black cotton shirt. He shut the locker door, turned and lit a cigarette. He remembered what Joe, the barman, had said: *You have no friends here, Mr. Harry except me and Randy. No friends . . . I mean that and there's trouble coming for you.*

'What's the matter, Harry?' Nina asked sharply.

'Nothing.' He looked at her. 'Why should there be?'

'You looked far away.'

'I guess I'm a faraway type.'

'What were you thinking about just now?'

Harry drew on his cigarette and released the smoke down his nostrils.

'Do you share your thoughts with anyone, Nina?'

She frowned.

'Sometimes.'

'But not often?'

'I guess not.'

'Then we're alike' He finished his coffee. 'Want a cigarette?'

'No, thank you.' She looked at him, hesitated, then went on, 'You were thinking of something, weren't you, Harry?'

Over the horizon Harry could see the outline of a small island.

'Is that Sheldon?' he asked, pointing.

'That's it.'

'Is it a good time to go to the Funnel right away?'

'Yes . . . it's better early . . . there's less swell. You really want to see the grotto, don't you?'

'Sure. We have plenty of time for other things.' He looked at her

and smiled. 'When do you think we should get back?'

'Before dark. I've brought plenty of food.'

'Does your father know you have taken the boat?'

'I told him I was going last night. He sleeps most of Sunday. He never gets up before dinner time.'

Harry nodded. He looked along the deck at the locked cabin, then taking a knife from his pocket he cut a length of nylon cord. One end he fastened to one of the metal rings on one of the belts and the other end of the cord to the metal ring on the other belt.

'You're sure you want to come?' he asked.

'Of course. It's marvellous in there. I've only seen it twice in about four years.'

He went along the deck until he could get a clear view of the island as they approached it. He could see it was of volcanic rock, rising steeply out of the sea and with many sea birds: gulls, cormorants and pelicans, on the rocky shelves.

Twenty minutes later, Nina was steering the boat into what seemed to Harry to be a large split in the rock wall. It was a tight fit, but she handled the boat well and then they were in a sheltered harbour, the rocks towering above them and a small landing jetty on which hung a number of old motor tyres to act as buffers at the far end of the harbour.

Nina cut the engines and Harry, taking a line, jumped onto the jetty and secured the boat.

'We have a walk and a climb,' Nina said as she handed up the aqualung equipment. She pointed to a narrow path that rose steeply and then disappeared around the side of the rock. 'Over there and we come to the Funnel.'

'I don't get it,' Harry said. 'You told me a boat could get through when the tide is right.'

'So it can. In a boat, you get to the Funnel on the other side of the island,' Nina explained. 'This is the quickest way when the tide is high.'

'Give me my bag, will you?'

She handed it to him.

'That's heavy . . . what's in it?'

'Stuff.' Harry smiled at her, and as she picked up the bag containing their lunch, he caught hold of her hand, swinging her onto the jetty. 'You lead the way.'

They set off, climbing the path until they reached the top.

From there, Harry could see down into a lagoon with access to the sea.

'There it is . . . that's the Funnel.' Nina pointed to the face of the rock.

'I don't see it.'

'You won't. It's under water. When the tide's right, the sea goes down some twenty feet, and then you can see the entrance. See the overhanging rock? That's where the entrance to the grotto is. We swim to that, then dive. There's a long tunnel and it takes us right into the grotto.'

Harry studied the overhanging rock.

'You're still sure you want to come?'

'Of course.'

'Well, okay, let's get down there and change.'

She led the way down the steep, narrow path to a platform of rock just above the lagoon. While they were climbing down, Solo's boat bobbed at its moorings. It wasn't until Nina's voice had died away that there was a sharp sound from the boat of a bolt being drawn. The cabin door swung open.

Fernando Cortez a .22 target rifle under his arm, stepped cautiously into the early morning sunshine.

* * *

Lepski opened his eyes and stared with bewilderment at the curtained window opposite him, seeing light filtering around the edges of the curtains. The curtains seemed oddly familiar,

then he realised with a sense of shock that he was in the guest room of his own house.

He sat up. A blinding pain crashed through his head, making him groan. He had to lean forward, his head in his hands for some moments before the pain receded. Then cautiously he got out of bed, startled to find himself in pyjamas.

He looked at the clock on the dressing table. It showed 06.35.

For some moments he stood still, too dazed to think, then he remembered Cortez, the blow on the head and until now, complete blackness.

Where was Carroll? What the hell was he doing in the guest room?

He walked unsteadily across the passage and into the main bedroom.

'Don't come near me, you drunken brute!' Carroll said dramatically from the bed. 'Go away and hide yourself!'

Lepski touched the back of his head, wincing when his fingers came into contact with a horribly tender spot.

'What happened? How did I get home?' he snarled.

'You were carried here . . . drunk!' Carroll sat up in bed. She was also fighting a headache, but she was so angry to see her husband

again on his feet and remembering what had happened the previous night, she was determined to inflict a tongue-lashing even if it killed her. 'I've never been so ashamed! I promise you, Lepski, if this ever happens again, I'm going back to mother! I warn you. I . . .'

'Shut up!' Lepski barked. 'What happened?'

Carroll stared at him in amazement. He had never spoken to her like this before. She immediately concluded he was still drunk. She gave a wail, turned over and buried her face in her pillow.

Lepski grabbed hold of her, and in spite of the raging pain in his head, turned and shook her.

'What happened? Don't tell me you're such a goddamn pinhead you thought I was drunk! I was sapped! What happened?'

Carroll broke free, not believing her ears.

'Are you daring to call me a pinhead?' she demanded shrilly.

'I'll call you something a damn sight worse if you don't tell me what happened?'

Carroll had never heard Lepski's cop voice before nor seen such white heat of rage in his eyes. He completely cowed her. Quickly, she told him how Manuel had come to her table, saying he (Lepski) had passed out, how she had found him in the Wildcat, had driven him home and with Harry Mitchell's help, had got him to bed.

'You really believe I was drunk . . . ME?' Lepski shouted indignantly.

'You stank of whisky. . . you were drunk!'

'I was sapped! They poured whisky over me! It's the oldest, corniest gag in the world! You ought to be ashamed of yourself . . . a cop's wife falling for that one!'

He left the room, stumbled down the stairs and entered the living room. Here he paused. He thought of Beigler and Hess. How would they react to such a yarn? He cursed under his breath. This could be goodbye to his promotion. He snatched up the telephone receiver and dialled police headquarters.

Half an hour later, he was driving fast down the highway.

Ten minutes later, he walked into the Detectives' room at Headquarters.

To his surprise, Beigler looked at him with concern.

'Are you all right, Tom? You haven't got concussion or something?'

Lepski had laid it on strong over the telephone and he was pleased he had made an impression.

'I'm all right,' he said, looking brave.

'You look like hell.'

'Never mind how I look . . . what's going on?'

'There's an alert out for Cortez. Fred is now with Mr. and Mrs.

Carlos. I'm just off to talk to Solo.'

Lepski showed his teeth in a snarl

'I'll come along. It's my bet Solo sapped me. I'm going to rip that fat punk's guts out and tie them around his goddamn neck!'

'Well, okay if you're sure you're up to it.' Beigler took his jacket from the back of his chair and slipped it on.

'I can't wait to get my hands on him!' Lepski said and meant it.

The Telex across the room began its noisy chatter, Jacoby left his desk and went over to the machine.

'Report on Harry Mitchell, Sarg, coming in from Washington.'

Beigler and Lepski joined Jacoby. Leaning forward they read the brief report, word by word, as; it appeared on the paper: *Harry Mitchell. Sergeant (Tech) 3rd Paratroop Regiment.*

1st Company. Served Vietnam 12 3.67. Killed in Action 2.4.67. Photocopy dossier follows.

Beigler reread the Telex, stood back and ran his fingers through his hair.

'Well, what do you know? The guy's dead!'

'So who's this punk who calls himself Harry Mitchell?' Lepski demanded. 'Come on, Sarg, let's pick him up! We'll give him the treatment.'

But Beigler wasn't to be rushed. He had had reports from Washington before and knew Washington wasn't infallible.

'Get a repeat on this, Max,' he said to Jacoby. 'Then call the Chief and report. Tell him Tom and I are on our way to the Dominico restaurant and we'll bring Mitchell in.'

'And we'll bring Solo in too,' Lepski said.

As they turned to leave the room, they paused. Standing in the doorway, looking scared and uneasy, was a short, thin man with hair down to his shoulders. Lepski immediately recognized him as Solo's guitar player and barman.

'Hold it, Sarg,' he said out of the corner of his mouth. 'This could be interesting.'

He went to the dividing rail and opened the swing gate.

'You want something?' he asked, staring at Randy.

Randy licked his lips.

'Yeah . . . I've got things on my mind. I reckoned it was best to come here and talk to someone.'

'Who are you?'

'Randy Roache. . . I work for Solo Dominico.'

'Is that right?' Lepski gave him his cop stare. 'Okay, Randy, come on in and take a chair. What have you got on your mind?'

Randy moved through the gateway, hesitated, then when Lepski waved him to a chair by Beigler's desk, he sat down. He wiped his

sweating face with a grubby handkerchief, then his sweating palms.

Beigler went to his desk and sat down. Lepski pulled up another chair and took out his notebook. Although his head was aching violently, he ignored it.

‘Well now, Randy,’ Beigler said. ‘What’s it all about?’

‘I’m a draft dodger,’ Randy said miserably.

‘So?’

‘Harry told me to beat it, but I got thinking once the cops started investigating I’d be on the run and I know what it means to be on the run, so I’ve come here to tell you about it.’

‘You know what it means? Have you been on the run before, Randy?’

‘No, but I know friends who have, and anyway, Harry said you could never get away from the cops once they start looking for you.’

‘Who’s Harry?’

‘Harry Mitchell. He also works at Solo’s place.’

‘What do you know about Mitchell, Randy?’

Randy looked startled.

‘Not much. We met on the road. He saved my life so I got him this job with Solo. I telephoned Solo, telling him Harry was an Olympic swimmer and a veteran from Vietnam so Solo jumped at him. I don’t know anything else about him.’

‘Let’s have the story, Randy. Never mind the draft dodging. I want to know how, when and where you met Mitchell, how he saved your life . . . the works.’

As Randy began talking, Beigler pressed a button under his desk that started a tape recorder, concealed in his desk drawer.

When Randy got to the moment he and Harry stopped the Mustang, he paused, hesitating whether to go on or not.

‘Keep going, Randy,’ Beigler said. ‘You’re doing fine. So Harry saw car headlights and he signalled. . . then what?’

Randy took the plunge.

‘This might not sound like the truth to you,’ he said, ‘but it is the truth.’

‘Keep going, Randy, we’ll talk over the details when you’ve said your say. Just keep going.’

So Randy told them how they had stopped the Mustang, towing a caravan, how the girl had handed over the wheel and had got into the caravan, how they had stopped at a cafe, how a Mercedes had pulled up and then taken off, and that Harry had thought the girl had gone off in the Mercedes.

‘We stopped at another cafe outside Fort Lauderdale,’ Randy went on. ‘Harry went in for coffee and I went to wake this girl.’

He gulped, then described finding Baldy’s body, how they had

driven to Hetterling Cove and buried him, dumped the caravan and then later, the Mustang.

Beigler leaned forward.

'It's a nice story, Randy, but it could read different, couldn't it?' He stared for a long moment, then went on, 'Suppose this mysterious doll never existed? Suppose Baldy gave you two a ride and you knocked him off?'

'Harry said you'd say just that,' Randy said bitterly. 'Well, we didn't! I'm telling you exactly how it happened. If you don't believe it, I can't help it, can I?'

Beigler grinned at him.

'Take it easy. I do believe it. I'm sure Baldy would never have stopped to pick up two guys wanting a ride. I just wanted to see your reaction.'

Randy heaved a sigh.

'Cops!' he said. 'You wouldn't trust your own mothers!'

'Watch your mouth, jerk,' Lepski said, 'or I'll watch it for you!'

'Go on, Randy,' Beigler said, signaling to Lepski to keep out of it. 'So you two buried Baldy, and then what?'

'We got rid of the Mustang and the caravan like I said. Then . . . no, wait a minute. I forgot. When Harry was burying the body, this dead guy's wig fell off and in the wig was a key. This was for a left luggage locker at the airport,' Beigler and Lepski exchanged glances.

'Go on,' Beigler said.

'Well, Harry went to the airport and collected a suitcase and inside the suitcase was a slip of paper. The message said something about Sheldon Island and the Funnel.'

'What else did he find in the suitcase?'

'A gun and a box of slugs,' Randy said. 'Clothes . . .'

What was written on this slip of paper . . . I want it exact.'

Randy thought for a moment, then shrugged.

'I don't remember. Something like this: Sheldon. The Funnel, and there was a date . . . I don't remember what the date was.'

While he had been talking the Telex had been chattering, now Jacoby came over to Beigler's desk and gave him the message that read: *Washington. 07.38. Our 3488769 Cancel. Ref. 3488768. Harry Mitchell. Sergeant (Tech) 3rd Paratroop Regiment 1st Company. Served Vietnam 12.3.67. Rpt missing in action. 2.4.67. Released POW 7.7.67. Discharged 5.5.69. Dossier follows.*

Beigler snorted and handed the Telex to Lepski.

'So they bring him back to life again. Even in Washington, they have dopes.'

Lepski read the Telex.

'Who hasn't?' he said, tossing the message on the desk. 'But we

still bring him in?’

‘Stop leaning on it!’ Beigler said curtly. He was longing for a cup of coffee but knew he would be wasting valuable time sending out for it. He turned to Randy and regarded him as he lit a cigarette.

‘Well now, Randy, you have said your piece, now I want you to tell me why you’ve said it.’

Randy shifted forward in his chair.

‘I came here because Harry saved my life . . . I like him and I owe him something. Now, he’s in trouble. I thought the best thing was to come to you and for you to take care of the trouble.’

Beigler squinted at him.

‘What trouble?’

‘Harry has got mixed up with Nina Dominico. I warned him. He has gone off with her to Sheldon Island in Solo’s boat. When Solo finds out . . . and he will . . . he’s going to kill Harry.’

‘Is Nina Solo’s wife?’

‘She’s his daughter,’ Lepski put in. ‘He’s crazy about her. This punk’s right. If Mitchell is fooling with Nina, he is heading for a load of trouble.’ Lepski turned to Randy. ‘Are you sure these two have gone to Sheldon Island?’

‘Harry told me last night he and she were going. They are there now. Solo’s boat’s gone. When Solo finds out, there’ll be murder!’

‘Why has Mitchell gone out there?’ Beigler asked.

‘He went to find out why Baldy died. He thinks Baldy hijacked something and it’s on the island.’

Beigler got to his feet.

‘Okay, Randy, we’ll talk to you later.’ He crossed over to Jacoby. ‘Max, take this kid and lock him up. Let him have coffee and cigarettes. Call the Chief and tell him we’re going to talk to Solo. I want a fast boat to take me to Sheldon Island. Have it come to Dominico’s harbour.’

Lepski came over, carrying the Telex.

‘I want that other Telex . . . the first one that said Mitchell was killed in action.’

Jacoby found it and handed it over.

‘What’s the idea, Tom?’ Beigler asked as the two detectives left the room and headed down the stairs.

‘I have an idea,’ Lepski said. ‘I think I can make Solo talk if you let me handle it. We’ll need four of the boys with us. Solo is like a rogue elephant. He’ll need a lot of handling.’

They came out into the hot sunshine.

‘What is it?’ Beigler asked suspiciously. ‘You haven’t been so bright so far, Tom. When Cortez threw his gun, why hadn’t you got him covered?’

Lepski licked his lips. The last thing he was going to tell Beigler was he hadn't his gun with him.

'The punk was like lightning. Before I even guessed who he was, the gun was in his hand.'

Beigler told a patrolman to tell Jacoby to send four men to the Dominico restaurant. He got into the waiting police car.

'How do you imagine you're going to make Solo talk?' he asked as Lepski got in beside him.

Lepski told him.

Chapter Nine

'Are you sure you want to come?' Harry asked.

'Of course . . . don't fuss!' Nina moved irritably. 'Of course I'm coming!'

They were standing on the rock platform just above the lagoon. She was wearing a bikini and Harry his trunks.

'Well, okay, if you're sure.'

He spent a few minutes helping her put on her aqualung and then put on his own, then the belts with the nylon cord. There was seven feet of cord, and as they stood side by side, poised to dive into the lagoon, the cord made a loop of slack between them.

He signaled and they both dived.

Concealed against the rock face, his fat back against the wall, Fernando Cortez watched them dive, then he started down the path that led to the rock platform.

Harry swam slowly, not exerting himself, constantly looking to see that Nina was keeping close to him. He was relieved to see she swam well. She pointed and he changed direction, then he saw a big opening in the rock face, well below the surface. She came close, touched his arm and pointed again.

Harry became aware that the current was getting stronger. He headed towards the opening, lengthening his stroke as the current began to force him against the side of the rock wall. Nina kept close to him. There was no drag on the cord between them.

With a few more powerful strokes he was in the tunnel. He felt the water turning colder. The current was running hard against him and he looked back to see how Nina was getting on. He could see she was struggling now and swimming hard and only just keeping up with him. The moment he slackened his stroke, he lost ground and was swept back abreast of her. He decided he had to exert his strongest effort if they were to get through the tunnel before he became exhausted.

He put on pressure and shot off, the cord tightening, dragging at him as Nina tried unsuccessfully to keep up with him. He kept on, towing her, cutting through the current, feeling his heart, under the strain, begin to hammer.

Minutes dragged by and his pace became slower. Without Nina acting as a brake, he knew he would have reached the end of the tunnel by now, and he began to wonder if they would make it. The drag on the rope increased, telling him that Nina had reached the end of her strength. He could see nothing. He was swimming in complete

darkness. He now had only two alternatives: to keep going or to turn and let the current sweep them back into the lagoon. He wasn't going back, he told himself and he made a racing effort, drawing on the reserve all great athletes keep for an emergency like this.

After a grinding, heart hammering two hundred yard fight, he suddenly felt the current slacken and he knew they were through the tunnel. He surfaced into a soft blue light and he pulled out his mouthpiece and lifted his goggles.

He floated on his back, panting, waiting for his heartbeat to return to normal, seeing Nina bob to the surface a yard or so from him.

'I thought you weren't going to make it,' she said breathlessly as she lifted her mask.

Harry shook the water out of his eyes.

'Nor did I.'

He looked around the grotto with its phosphorescent walls and water. Over to his right, he was startled to see a forty foot launch, painted white, its cockpit red. Clearly painted on her prow was her name: Gloria II Vero Beach.

'Did you know this launch was in here?' he asked, turning to Nina.

'Know?' She shook her head, splashing water into his face as her wet hair made a swinging flail. 'Of course not! It's not from Paradise City. It must be a smuggler's boat that got trapped in here by the tide.'

'You think that's what it is?'

'It's from Vero Beach.'

Harry undid the knot on his belt, releasing the cord that held them together, then he swam fast to the launch. He swam around it, seeing the portholes of the cabin were smashed, seeing neat rows of bullet holes, like stitching, along the gunnel.

Nina joined him.

'She's been in a fight,' she said. 'Let's get aboard.'

Harry swam around the stern, found a hanging rope and hauled himself onto the deck. He helped Nina to come aboard. What looked like stains of dark red paint marked the deck and when they reached the cockpit, the dark stains were everywhere.

'That's blood,' Harry said. 'Looks as if the crew was wiped out. I'll look in the cabin. You'd better stay here.'

'I want to see.'

He turned and regarded her.

'You're not squeamish, are you, Nina?'

Her eyes narrowed.

'What do you mean?'

'I said you're not squeamish are you?'

She shrugged impatiently.

'Blood doesn't frighten me if that's what you mean.' She began to climb out of the cockpit but he caught hold of her arm and pulled her back.

'Wait a minute, Nina. I want to talk to you.'

'We can talk in the sun . . . later. I want to see what's in the cabin.'

'Don't you know? Tell me something, Nina, were you watching when Solo and Cortez held Baldy Riccard's foot in a fire?'

She stiffened. For a brief moment he saw a flash of vicious anger come into her eyes, but it was instantly gone.

'What are you saying?'

'You know,' Harry said quietly. 'Under torture, Baldy told Solo this launch was trapped in here, didn't he?'

'It's not your business, is it, Harry?' Her voice was harsh and cold.

'It wouldn't have been my business if you hadn't involved me,' Harry said. He sat on the bench seat, took from his trunks a plastic case containing his cigarettes and lighter. He offered her a cigarette.

She hesitated, then shrugging, took a cigarette and accepted a light. She leaned against the steering wheel, the cigarette between her lips while she regarded him.

'Do you want to tell me about it, Nina?'

'There's nothing to tell.'

'When Randy telephoned Solo, telling him he had run into me who was an expert swimmer and we were heading to Paradise City by highway 1, he did some quick thinking, didn't he?'

'I don't know what you're talking about,' Nina said, her eyes like chips of ice.

'Yes, you do.' Harry took a long drag at his cigarette. 'Solo and you set me up for your patsy, didn't you? It was you, wearing the anti-dazzle goggles, the white scarf, with the story you were taking a caravan to Miami, who planted Baldy's body on Randy and me. Your outfit is still in the locker of Solo's boat. You should have got rid of it. That was careless of you. You gave yourself to me because it was the easiest way you could think of to get me to pilot you into this grotto. That's it, isn't it?'

'I loved your lovemaking, Harry.' She moved her body suggestively. 'Don't be so suspicious. Suppose we make love now?'

He flicked his cigarette into the water, got out of the cockpit and walked along the deck to the cabin. After a moment's hesitation, she trailed along after him.

He pushed open the splintered door of the cabin and peered into the semi-darkness. It took him some moments for his eyes to become accustomed to the gloom, then he saw on one of the berths four

wooden boxes: each a foot by a foot and a half in size. He went down the few steps into the cabin and examined the boxes. They were secured by cord. As he unclipped his knife from his belt, Nina said hastily, 'Don't open them, Harry. The way they are packed now they're watertight. We can swim them out.'

'So you knew the boxes were here?'

She arched her shoulders as if she were trying to contain her impatience.

'Yes, I knew.'

'Baldy told you?'

Her hands turned to fists.

'Yes!'

'What's in them?'

'Money.'

'How much.'

'I don't know . . . a lot.' She lifted her full breasts and rearranged her bra. 'Don't worry, Harry. Solo is going to share it all with you.'

'Is he? That's nice.'

Harry lifted one of the boxes. It was heavy.

'These won't float.'

She pointed to a locker.

'There are life jackets in there. We can tie one to each box and then we can swim them out. The current is with us on our way out.'

Harry smiled. 'You really have thought this operation out, haven't you, Nina?'

'So, all right, I've thought it out!' She was again trying to conceal her impatience. 'Let's get going, Harry.'

'Not yet. There's a question I want to ask.' He moved forward so he was close to her. 'Who is the passenger with us in the locked cabin, Nina? Solo or Cortez?'

* * *

Solo was in his office when Joe came in, his big eyes rolling.

'Boss, the cops are here.'

This came as no surprise to Solo. It surprised him they hadn't come sooner. Instead of spending his Sunday morning in bed as he usually did, he got up early and had been awaiting their arrival for the past hour.

He wasn't worried. He was sure Lepski didn't know who had knocked him cold. Solo had crept up on him like a ghost, and he knew Lepski had been far too occupied with Cortez to have the slightest suspicion. All the same he knew there would be an inquiry and awkward questions asked about Cortez.

‘Show them in, Joe,’ he said, getting to his feet.

As Beigler and Lepski came into the office, Joe moved around them and hurried away. Solo smiled expansively. ‘Come right in, gentlemen,’ he said. ‘Ah, Mr. Lepski! How are you this morning? Very sorry about last night. I got my man to see you home . . . very sorry.’

‘Yeah,’ Lepski said, moving into the office. Beigler remained by the door. He had agreed that Lepski should handle the interview. ‘And you’re going to be a lot more sorry, Solo.’

Solo lost some of his smile.

‘Now, Mr. Lepski, you know it wasn’t my fault. You know, honestly, you had just a little drop . . .’

‘Shut up!’ Lepski snarled. ‘Sit down!’

Seeing the ferocious expression in Lepski’s eyes, Solo, now a little uneasy, sat down.

‘Where’s Harry Mitchell?’ Lepski demanded.

Solo blinked. This he wasn’t expecting.

‘Mitchell? Maybe in his cabin . . . maybe swimming . . . I don’t know. It’s his day off.’

‘I heard it Mitchell is with your daughter on Sheldon Island,’ Lepski said.

Solo shifted and his eyes turned misty.

‘No. I don’t know who told you that, Mr. Lepski, but Nina only goes to Sheldon on her own. Because she likes to be on her own on the island from time to time, I let her have my boat.’

‘Are you telling me Mitchell isn’t right now with her on the island?’

‘Of course he isn’t!’

‘But your daughter is?’

‘Yes . . . she took the boat.’

‘What makes you so sure Mitchell isn’t with her, Solo?’

‘I saw her leave. She was alone! She wouldn’t take Mitchell or any man out there on her own. She’s a good girl!’

Lepski grinned evilly.

‘Are you sure about that, Solo?’

Blood rushed into Solo’s face.

‘You watch your mouth, Mr. Lepski! I won’t hear a word against my daughter! Against me . . . okay, but against her . . . no!’

‘Fine. Take it easy, Solo. So we don’t have to get worried, huh?’

‘What you mean? Get worried . . . about what, hey?’

‘We were getting worried about your daughter, Solo,’ Lepski said. ‘We got a tip she had gone out to Sheldon with Mitchell and it sounded like a good tip, but as you know he isn’t on the island, then we don’t have to worry, do we? We needn’t have come rushing out here with four of our boys. We could have stayed home.’

Solo clenched his big fists.

‘I don’t understand . . . worried about what?’

Lepski turned to Beigler.

‘Think we should tell him, Sarg?’

Beigler shrugged indifferently.

‘I don’t see why,’ he said. ‘If Mitchell isn’t out there with his kid, I don’t see what business it is of his, do you?’

‘Yeah, that’s right.’ Lepski nodded. ‘Not his business.’

‘What is all this, hey? What is it?’ Solo demanded, banging his fists on his desk.

‘But, of course, if he is lying and Mitchell is out there, then it could be rough on the girl,’ Lepski said, ignoring Solo.

‘He’s too smart to lie to us,’ Beigler said, staring at Solo. ‘Aren’t you, Solo?’

Solo took out his handkerchief and wiped his sweating face.

‘I don’t understand, Sergeant. I – I . . .’

‘We’re wasting time,’ Lepski snapped. ‘Where’s Mitchell’s cabin?’

‘What do you want him for?’ Solo asked.

‘What do you know about him, Solo?’

‘Me? Nothing . . . he’s a fine swimmer . . . a nice guy . . . I . . .’

‘How do you know he’s a nice guy?’

Solo licked his dry lips.

‘He - he acts nice . . . what is it?’

‘You didn’t make any inquiries about him before you hired him?’

Solo stiffened.

‘No. Inquiries? What inquiries?’

‘You mean you hired him as a lifeguard without checking on him?’ Lepski said, his face expressing amazement. ‘A lifeguard teaches swimming, doesn’t he?’

‘Sure . . . why not? Is there something wrong in teaching swimming?’

‘Mitchell gave swimming lessons, huh?’

‘Yes.’

‘Young girls, huh? Handling them in the sea, huh?’

‘He gave them swimming lessons.’ Solo’s voice was husky now.

‘If a guy’s right, then it’s okay, but if he isn’t right, it’s dangerous, isn’t it?’ Lepski said. ‘A kinky guy gets his hands where they shouldn’t go, Solo. I don’t have to tell you that. Girls can’t complain. It could be an accident, but the hands are there, aren’t they?’

‘But Harry isn’t like that!’

‘Isn’t he? How do you know? You didn’t make inquiries?’

Solo got to his feet. He looked like a bull with the pics in.

‘What are you telling me?’

Lepski took out his wallet, produced the Telex and dropped it on

the desk.

‘Washington says Sergeant Harry Mitchell, 3rd Paratroop Regiment, 1st Company was killed in action on April 2nd 1967. Read it for yourself. That’s official: straight from Washington where they don’t make mistakes!’

Beigler coughed and hid a grin by lighting a cigarette.

With a shaking hand, Solo picked up the flimsy, read the message, then stared at Lepski.

‘How do you know your lifeguard is Mitchell?’

Solo flinched.

‘If he isn’t Mitchell . . . who is he?’

‘Now, Solo, you’re beginning to act intelligent.’ Lepski paused to light a cigarette while he stared at Solo with his hard, cop eyes. ‘Yeah . . . that’s a good question. Who is he? Maybe if you had made inquiries about him you wouldn’t be asking that question now. Have you ever heard of Dave Donahue?’

Solo shook his head. His face was bewildered.

‘You haven’t huh? You don’t read the newspapers? You’ve heard of the Boston Strangler?’

Solo gulped.

‘Yes . . . but . . .’

‘Well, Donahue is like him: a sex killer. He escaped from the Sherwin Institute for the Criminally Insane three weeks ago. It had a full coverage in the press, but then you’re too busy running this joint to read newspapers, aren’t you, Solo? The newspapers published a description. Donahue is a big man, blond, pale blue eyes, a badly set broken nose, around thirty years of age. One time he was a pro fighter. He was also a swimmer: won a bronze medal for diving.’

Solo’s legs collapsed under him. He groped for his chair and sank into it.

‘That’s Mitchell!’

‘No, it isn’t. Washington says Mitchell’s dead. That’s Dave Donahue, a dangerous, cunning sex maniac. He’s already killed three young girls. He’s as nutty as a fruit cake and when he gets a girl to himself he really gives her the treatment. When he’s through with her, he cuts her up.’

With sweat streaming off his face, Solo lumbered to his feet.

He started across the office to the door. Both Lepski and Beigler tried to stop him, but it was like trying to stop a charging bull. He swept them aside and rushed out into the open where four of Beigler’s biggest and toughest patrolmen were waiting.

They got him back into the office again but only after clubbing him half silly. They slammed him down in his chair and drew back, panting.

Lepski winked at Beigler, then took up his stand in front of Solo who was holding his head in his hands, moaning to himself.

‘What’s the fuss about, Solo?’ Lepski demanded. ‘What the hell do you think you’re playing at?’

Solo lifted his head and stared blearily at the four cops, then wrung his hands.

‘Let me go to my little girl, Mr. Lepski,’ he pleaded. ‘She’s with Mitchell . . . I was stupid to lie to you. Let me go to her.’

‘How are you getting to Sheldon, Solo . . . you swimming?’

‘I’ll get a boat . . . I’ll . . .’ Solo stopped, realising it would take some time to get a boat big enough to reach Sheldon.

‘We’ve got a boat, Solo,’ Lepski said. ‘You want a ride?’

Solo got unsteadily to his feet. His head felt as if it could burst at any second.

‘What are we waiting for? That sonofabitch could have killed her by now! What are we waiting for?’

‘You don’t get a ride until you sing, Solo,’ Lepski said, and smiled his evil smile. ‘I mean that. I want the whole Baldy story. I want to know why Mitchell is on Sheldon with Nina. I want to know where Cortez is and how he figures in this setup.’

Solo glared at him.

‘I don’t know anything about Baldy! I told you!’

‘That’s too bad.’ Beigler turned to Lepski. ‘How about some coffee? This is a restaurant isn’t it?’

‘Good idea.’ Lepski turned to one of the cops. ‘Get some coffee organised. We could be here all the morning.’

‘We’re wasting time!’ Solo shouted frantically. ‘He could be killing her!’

‘Well, if he does, you have only yourself to blame,’ Lepski said. ‘You don’t leave here until you sing, Solo, so make up your goddamn mind!’

Solo writhed with impotent rage.

‘You’re bluffing!’ he shouted, smashing his huge fists down on his desk. ‘I don’t believe Mitchell is Donahue! You’re lying!’

‘Washington says Mitchell died in 1967,’ Lepski said in a bored voice. ‘Maybe your barman reads the papers.’ He turned to one of the patrolmen. ‘Get the barman, Alec.’

A few moments later, Joe came in, sweating, his eyes rolling.

‘What’s your name?’ Lepski asked.

‘Joe Small, boss.’

‘Okay, Joe, have you ever heard of Dave Donahue?’

Joe gaped at him.

‘Have you or haven’t you?’ Lepski barked.

‘Ain’t he the guy who killed all those girls?’

Lepski smiled, reached forward and patted Joe's shoulder.

'That's right. You read about him in the papers. You remember he was a big blond guy, huh?'

'Yeah boss. A fighter.'

'That's it. Okay, Joe, beat it.'

When Joe had gone, Lepski stared at Solo who was now looking ten years older. His face was the colour of cold mutton fat.

'Satisfied, Solo? You want to make up your mind. This guy does it slow, but they've been out there some time now. There's still a chance if you hurry.'

'I'll tell you about it on the boat,' Solo said huskily and got to his feet.

'Okay,' Lepski said, 'Come on, boys, let's go.'

While the police launch raced towards Sheldon Island, Solo sat in the cabin and talked.

'Mr. Carlos wanted to get a big consignment of cigars out of Cuba,' he told the two detectives. 'They were his property but there was this ban on Havana cigars - there's big money in cigars, you understand: everyone wants them - so he planned to smuggle them in. He hired Baldy Riccard who was a Castro fan to fix the deal and gave him money to pay off Castro's boys and bring the cigars back. There was three hundred thousand dollars involved. Cortez who works for Mrs. Carlos, overheard Carlos and Baldy talking. He came to me because I have a boat. Now,

I'm no Commie, Mr. Lepski, so I thought it would be in the National interest to hijack Baldy's boat as it took off for Cuba. I was planning to hand the money over to the Customs authorities as soon as I got it.'

'Yeah? I can imagine,' Lepski said with his evil grin. 'So what happened?'

'Cortez and me intercepted Baldy's boat off Sheldon. It was pretty dark and instead of stopping, Baldy tried to run for it. Cortez got kind of annoyed. He had a sub machine gun and there was some shooting.' Solo looked hopefully at Beigler who was taking all this down in his notebook. 'I didn't want any shooting, you understand? I thought Baldy would heave to and there would be no unpleasantness. In the darkness he got away, but the boat was pretty hard hit, and after we had wasted a lot of time searching for it, we decided it was sunk and that was our bad luck.' Solo licked his lips, hesitated, then went on, 'A couple of months later, Baldy walks into the restaurant. Seeing him shook me because I thought he was drowned. He tells me he wants to hire my boat. I could tell by the way he talked he had no idea it was me who had tried to hijack him. Well, I wasn't going to lend him my boat, but I told him he might get one at Vero Beach. As soon as he had

gone, I called Cortez and told him to meet me at Vero Beach and Nina and I drove out there in my car and found Baldy. Cortez turned up in Mrs. Carlos's car as his wasn't running so good.' Again Solo hesitated. 'Well, Cortez played rough. He persuaded Baldy to tell us what happened to his boat.'

'You mean Cortez stuck Baldy's foot in a fire and kept it there?'

Solo wiped his sweating face with the back of his hand.

'That's what he did. I want you to understand, Mr. Lepski, I didn't like it.'

'And I bet Baldy didn't like it either.'

'No, I guess he didn't. In fact, Mr. Lepski, he had a heart attack or something. Anyway, he died on us.' Solo looked hopefully at Lepski. 'You understand I had no idea he would do a thing like that.'

Lepski wagged his head.

'Tough on you.'

'That's right, Mr. Lepski. It upsets me a lot. He was an old friend. It upset me.'

'But you did persuade him to tell you what happened to the boat before he had a heart attack?'

'Oh, sure. He told us that. When Cortez started blasting off with his machine gun, Baldy's crew got killed and Baldy took the wheel. He headed for Sheldon. It was dark so we didn't see him. Somehow he got through the Funnel and into the blue grotto. The tide was right. Once he was in the grotto, he decided to hole up there until we got tired of looking for him. But he didn't know about the tide and when he got ready to leave, he found he was trapped. Well, he stayed there for three weeks until the food began to run out and then he got desperate. He put on a lifejacket and towing a rubber raft, he got swept through the tunnel and back to the mainland. He went to Carlos and told him what had happened. Carlos knew about the Funnel and knew the tide would be right on the 27th of this month. He told Baldy to get another boat and go to the Funnel on 27th and get the money off the other boat that was trapped. Well, when we knew Carlos was expecting to get the money by 27th we had to act fast. Right when we were wondering how to get into the grotto before the 27th, Randy Roache telephoned and told us about this guy Mitchell or whatever his name is. He said he was an Olympic swimmer. Nina figured a real top swimmer could get into the grotto and get the money out. If he was that good, he could help her through the tunnel so she could make sure he didn't double-cross us. So we hit on the idea of planting Baldy's body on this guy so we could have a hold on him if he didn't cooperate. We borrowed a caravan, Nina used Baldy's car and the plan went off without a hitch.' Solo turned and looked anxiously at the island that was now in sight. 'Can't this goddamn boat go faster?'

Beigler handed his notebook to Solo.

'Initial each page and sign the last page, Solo,' he said. 'We're going as fast as we can.'

Without even bothering to read what Beigler had written, Solo did as he was told.

Lepski made a sign to one of the patrolmen who quietly drew his Billy and balanced it in his hand.

'You can relax, Solo,' Lepski said. 'Harry Mitchell's come back to life.' He took the second Telex from his wallet and handed it to Solo.

Solo read it, crumpled it in his great fist and glared with vicious fury at Lepski who grinned.

'You hit me, Solo, so I hit you. Never hit a cop; it's bad medicine.'

With a roar of rage, Solo launched himself at Lepski but the club, wielded with scientific precision smashed down on his skull and he spread out on the floor of the cabin.

* * *

'Passenger? I don't know what you mean,' Nina said and backed away.

'I had an idea either Solo or Cortez was in the locked cabin,' Harry returned.

'No one was in the cabin! We're wasting time! Let's get these boxes on deck!'

Harry regarded her, then shrugged. He carried the boxes, one by one, out of the cabin and laid them in a row on the deck. Nina came up with the four lifejackets. In a few moments they had strapped the jackets around the boxes. Then Harry found a length of rope and roped the boxes together.

He helped Nina adjust her aqualung, then adjusted his own.

He shoved the boxes overboard. They landed with a splash in the water, the jackets giving them enough buoyancy to float. He looked at Nina who nodded and they both dived off the boat. Harry picked up the floating rope and began towing the four boxes towards the mouth of the tunnel.

Nina swam beside him. They reached and entered the tunnel.

The strong current swept them forward. Nina caught hold of one of the boxes and hung on as she was buffeted and hustled through the darkness.

The first indication that warned Fernando Cortez that the operation had been completed was the sight of the four wooden boxes in life jackets as they floated out of the mouth of the tunnel. He was lying behind a rock on the platform where Harry had left his bag. He held the .22 target rifle in his fat, sweating hands, the butt dug hard

into his shoulder. He levelled the rifle sight on the boxes, his finger taking in the slack of the trigger and he waited.

He, Solo and Nina had agreed that as soon as Harry appeared from the tunnel, Cortez was to kill him. Harry would have served his purpose, and a rifle bullet was all that was necessary to put period to his usefulness. The plan was for Nina to swim the boxes to where Cortez was hiding, return to the boat and bring it around the island to the lagoon. Cortez would load the boxes onto the boat and they would return to the mainland. Cortez would receive his share, give Solo the value of his boat and sail for Yucatan: a long trip, but in Solo's boat and at this time of year, a safe one.

Always suspicious of a double-cross, Solo had been uneasy about the plan. Suppose, he argued to Nina when Cortez had gone, Cortez took it into his head not to return to the mainland?

Suppose he killed her as well as Harry and grabbed all the money? Nina had argued him out of this thinking. Cortez, she had told Solo, was in love with her. When Solo's face turned dark with rage, she had assured him that if Cortez was the last man left alive she wouldn't dream of marrying him. 'Marry that fat, stupid pig?' she had said and had laughed scornfully, but the fact that he was so madly in love with her assured her safety. She had, she told Solo, already hinted to Cortez that once the share out had been made, she would go with him to Yucatan, and Cortez was hopeful. Again she had laughed. 'I'll leave you to handle him, Papa, when he learns I won't be going.' So good was her acting that Solo was convinced. Her acting had been good because she was speaking half-truths. She was in love with Cortez, and they were planning to go on from Sheldon to Yucatan with the money. There was something about the fat, brutal Mexican that stirred Nina's blood. The thought of escaping from Solo's supervision, living with Cortez in Mexico City and spending three hundred thousand dollars was heady wine to Nina. What she didn't know was that Cortez already had a fat, ugly wife and three fat, ugly children living in Taxco. Cortez had no intention of marrying Nina. He planned to live with her until the money began to run out and then he would quietly drop out of sight.

As he squinted along the barrel of the rifle, Cortez's eyebrows came together in a worried frown.

He could see the four boxes floating just below him, but where was Mitchell? Then he remembered that Mitchell was wearing an aqualung. Cortez told himself Mitchell would come to the surface any moment now, and when he saw a head bob up out of the water some yards from the boxes, he quickly shifted his aim and squeezed the trigger. In the split second before the rifle fired, he realised it was Nina's head he was aiming at and not Harry's.

He saw Nina half spring from the water and throw up her arms.

He saw blood appearing on the mask covering her face, then he watched her drop limply on her back and remain floating, blood making a dark circle around her.

Cortez remained motionless for a long minute, then he cursed loudly and vilely. Feverishly, he scanned the surface of the lagoon, looking for Harry, but couldn't see him. He looked down at the floating boxes far out of his reach. He would have to get back to the boat and bring it round to the lagoon, he told himself.

But where was that damned Mitchell?

He got to his feet.

'Hold it! Drop that gun!'

He looked over his shoulder, his lips coming off his teeth in a savage snarl.

Standing above him was Lepski, and slightly behind was Beigler. Both detectives had guns in their hands. Like a trapped animal, Cortez swung his rifle around, firing at the same time. Lepski's bullet took him between his eyes and he reeled back and splashed into the sea.

'That's two to be fished out,' Lepski said in disgust. 'Now where's Mitchell?'

Watching all this from the far side of the lagoon, concealed in the heavy shadows, Harry decided it was time to go. He gently submerged and swam invisibly out of the lagoon and headed back to Solo's boat.

Beigler told the four patrolmen to strip off and bring the two bodies and the boxes to the rock side where they could be dragged out.

While the patrolmen were undressing, Lepski continued to survey the surface of the lagoon.

'Do you think he's still in the grotto, Sarg?' he asked.

'Who is still in the grotto?' Beigler asked.

Lepski stared at him.

'Mitchell for God's sake!'

'How would I know?' Beigler said indifferently. 'Instead of jumping around like you want a pee, suppose you get into the water and do some work.'

Lepski reacted as if he had touched with a hot iron.

'Who . . . me? Get in there! Mitchell may be getting away!'

'You heard me!' Beigler snarled. 'Get in there!'

Thirty minutes later, and only with great difficulty, they got the bodies of Nina and Cortez onto the rock platform. Finally, they began to get the boxes up.

As Lepski was cursing and struggling with one of the boxes, he heard the sound of a boat engine starting up.

'That's Solo's boat, Sarg,' he bawled, and leaving the box, he

swam to the side and heaved himself up onto the platform.

‘Mitchell’s getting away!’

‘Does that bother you?’ Beigler asked. ‘I don’t remember telling you to break off operations.’

‘But he’s getting away?’ Lepski cried excitedly.

Beigler regarded him.

‘Is he? We don’t know he was ever here. We have only Solo’s word for it and he’s a known liar. We don’t even know for sure that Mitchell wasn’t killed in action.’

Lepski began to say something but there was a look in Beigler’s eyes that stopped him.

‘I don’t get it, Sarg,’ he said uneasily.

‘Look at it this way, Tom. You and me were goddamn lucky not to have to serve in Vietnam,’ Beigler said. ‘My kid brother was killed out there. Any guy who did his three years in that mess deserves a break. He’s in the clear anyway. If we pull him in, he goes to jail, until the law decides he is in the clear. That would spoil his vacation.’ Beigler squinted at Lepski. ‘Do you want to spoil his vacation?’

Lepski could no longer hear the drone of the boat’s engine.

He grimaced, then shrugged.

‘I guess not,’ he said. ‘I hadn’t thought of it that way.’

‘That’s why you’ll never make a sergeant,’ Beigler said with smug satisfaction. ‘Suppose you get your ugly carcass back into the sea and get those boxes out!’

* * *

The setting sun was making long shadows as Harry Mitchell reached The Stop ’n Eat restaurant some fifteen miles north of Vero Beach, fronting highway 1. He had taken Solo’s boat back to the Dominico restaurant. He had gone to his cabin and collected his things. As he packed, he had heard Manuel snoring in the adjacent cabin. A silence hung over the restaurant buildings.

The beach looked lonely and deserted. He paused for a last look around, then he had walked to Randy’s cabin, opened the door and looked into the empty room. He had nodded his satisfaction.

So Randy had taken his advice . . . he had gone.

Then he had started for the highway.

He had walked all day, feeling like walking and making no attempt to stop any passing car. It was Sunday and the trucks were taking a rest. He wondered if there was a police alert out for him. Life had become too vivid, like looking through a high—powered telescope for him to care. He had seen Nina die and he had guessed that Cortez had made a mistake. He had seen Cortez die and that had given him a

feeling of satisfaction. He had wanted some sun and sea air: this was what he had got: some vacation!

He was ready for a meal when he reached the restaurant. The time was 19.15. He had been walking steadily all day and now he was tired.

As he moved towards the entrance to the restaurant he saw, parked in the only occupied parking bay, a dusty blue Chevrolet.

He climbed the steps, pushed open the door and entered a brightly lit rectangular room with a bar and some forty unoccupied tables with two forlorn looking negro waiters hovering around them with the sad air of men with nothing to do.

At the bar, a glass of whisky and ice in his hand, was a short, fat man with a red, good-natured face, a balding head, wearing a city suit that looked in need of pressing.

As Harry reached the bar, the fat man looked at him, then nodded. His brown eyes went over Harry with the close stare of a man who likes to sum people up to decide the best angle with which to approach them.

‘Hi!’ the fat man said, smiling. ‘Dave Harkness. I’m breaking a rule . . . drinking on my own. Save me!’ His smile widened. ‘Let me buy you a drink.’

‘Harry Mitchell.’ Harry leaned on the bar. ‘Thanks: a beer, please.’ Harkness signaled to the negro barman.

‘Looks like things are slack here,’ he said. ‘You eating?’

‘I aim to.’

‘May as well put the bibs on together then. That’s another thing I don’t like. . . eating alone.’

‘Sure.’

The beer arrived and Harry drank. He sighed, lit a cigarette, not offering his pack as Harkness was smoking a cigar. He asked to see the menu. Harkness leaned forward and read it with him. They decided on the chicken dinner.

‘You’re just out of the Army?’ Harkness said.

‘Everyone seems to know that.’

‘Not so hard. You on vacation?’

‘It’s over. I’m heading for New York.’

‘Is that right?’ Harkness again regarded Harry thoughtfully. ‘I’m in wholesale fruit. Been in the game for twenty years.’

They moved to a table and ordered beer. Harkness talked of this and that. He asked questions about Vietnam but when he saw Harry was bored with the topic, he switched to the racial problems and the new taxes.

It wasn’t until the meal was over and they had paid their checks that Harkness said, ‘I’m going through to New York want to come

along with, me?’

Harry shook his head.

‘Thanks, but I plan to stop off at Yellow Acres. I want to revisit friends. I promised I’d call in on my way back.’

‘Yellow Acres?’ Harkness paused to light a cigar. ‘My hometown. Who are your friends? I bet I know them. I know everyone in Yellow Acres: nice little town if you don’t have to live there for long.’

‘Mr. Morelli and his daughter,’ Harry said. ‘He runs the restaurant there.’

Harkness frowned. He looked at Harry, his mouth making a small grimace.

‘You know Toni? One of the nicest. Have you known him long?’

‘Oh no. I stopped off at his restaurant a few days back. He and his daughter were good to me.’

‘They had bad luck.’ Harkness rubbed his hand over his balding head. ‘Toni died four days ago. Maria is in some hospital . . . first degree burns.’

Harry stiffened.

‘What are you telling me?’ His voice was harsh.

‘Yeah . . . a bunch of kids set fire to the restaurant. Toni was trapped. Maria managed to get out, but she’s bad, so I hear. The place was burned down.’

‘Kids?’

‘Hippies,’ Harkness shook his head. ‘Five of them. The cops got them. They’ve been looking for them for some time. Stinking little junkies.’

‘Four boys and a girl?’

Harkness stared at him.

‘That’s right. One with a broken arm. They said they did it to get even.’

Harry crushed out his cigarette. He sat in silence for some moments while Harkness looked curiously at him.

‘We get a lot of trouble from the Hippies in this district,’ Harkness said after a while. ‘I don’t like driving at night any more on this highway. That’s why I welcome company. If you get a puncture or a breakdown it can be dangerous. Only the other night, my old friend Sam Bentz . . . he’s been a trucker for years . . . had a blow-out. The Hippies found him. He’s in jail now, facing a manslaughter charge. He killed two of them before they set fire to his truck.’

Harry’s hands turned into fists.

‘Sam Bentz gave me a ride as far as Orangeville,’ he said. ‘I planned to ride back with him. What happened?’

‘Well, he got this blow-out and as he was changing the tyre, ten Hippies descended on him. Sam has seen service in the Korean war:

he's a toughie. He had this Indian club. The Hippies were stoned to the eyeballs. He cracked the skulls of two of them before he went down. They kicked him around, set fire to the truck, then found these two junkies were dead so they took off. Sam has a broken arm and he's lost all his teeth. He's in jail now but he won't stay there long, but he won't be the same man again either.' Harkness stood up. Well, let's go. We've got a long night's drive.'

If I'd known it was going to be like this, he was thinking as Harkness started the car, I would have stayed on with the Regiment. The Ice Age . . . the Stone Age . . . the Bronze Age . . . now the Age of Violence. You can't get away from it: it seems to be everywhere.

He leaned back, watching the headlights of the approaching cars, seeing the groups of Hippies waving their thumbs. The future people, Sam Bentz had called them.

He thought of Maria in hospital, the fat, good natured Morelli dead, Nina floating in the sea, her head a red halo, Solo in the hands of the police and Randy. . . where was Randy?

Harry shrugged. He reached for a cigarette as the Chevrolet, roaring along the highway, carried him towards the jungle known as New York.